

GEORGES SIMENON

The Man
from London



PENGUIN
CLASSICS



Georges Simenon

THE MAN FROM LONDON

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS



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About the Author

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903 and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. He wrote *The Man from London* in 1933, soon after the successful launch of his celebrated series of novels featuring Inspector Maigret.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

The Man from London

‘I love reading Simenon. He makes me think of Chekhov’

— William Faulkner

‘A truly wonderful writer ... marvellously readable – lucid, simple, absolutely in tune with the world he creates’

— Muriel Spark

‘Few writers have ever conveyed with such a sure touch, the bleakness of human life’

— A. N. Wilson

‘One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century ... Simenon was unequalled at making us look inside, though the ability was masked by his brilliance at absorbing us obsessively in his stories’

— *Guardian*

‘A novelist who entered his fictional world as if he were part of it’

— Peter Ackroyd

‘The greatest of all, the most genuine novelist we have had in literature’

— André Gide

‘Superb ... The most addictive of writers ... A unique teller of tales’

— *Observer*

‘The mysteries of the human personality are revealed in all their disconcerting complexity’

— Anita Brookner

‘A writer who, more than any other crime novelist, combined a high literary reputation with popular appeal’

— P. D. James

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— *Independent*

‘Compelling, remorseless, brilliant’

— John Gray

‘Extraordinary masterpieces of the twentieth century’

— John Banville



1

At the time, you think they are hours like any others. Only with hindsight do you realize how exceptional they were and then you do your damndest to reconstruct the missing thread, to piece together the isolated minutes.

Why, that evening, had Maloin left home in a foul mood? They had had dinner at seven, as usual. There were grilled herrings, because they were in season. Ernest, his young son, had eaten without making a mess.

Now Maloin remembered his wife saying:

‘Henriette dropped by earlier.’

‘Again?’

Just because his daughter was a maid in the same town, almost in the same neighbourhood, was no reason for her to come running home on any pretext. Not to mention that it was always to complain. Monsieur Lainé had said this, or Madame Lainé had said that.

‘There may be a vacancy coming up at the pharmacist’s. At least it’ll be cleaner than the butcher’s.’

It wasn’t anything serious, and yet Maloin had left in a foul mood. His foul mood wasn’t serious either. It didn’t stop him taking his blue enamel can full of coffee with him, or the bread and butter and sausage his wife had made ready for him.

He left at the same time every evening, at exactly six minutes to eight. His house was up on the cliff, along with two or three others, and when he walked out he saw the sea below him, with the long jetty of the harbour, and, further to the left, the dock and the town of Dieppe. As it was the middle of winter, the landscape at this hour was nothing but lights: the reds

and the greens of the jetties, the white lights of the quays doubled by their reflection in the water, and finally all the teeming lights of the town.

‘It’s not too foggy,’ he observed.

They had only just emerged from a fog that had lasted four days, a fog so thick that people had been bumping into one another in the streets.

Maloin descended the steep path, turned left and headed for the harbour. By two minutes to eight, he was opposite the station. By a minute to eight, he had started climbing the iron ladder to his cabin.

He was a signalman. Unlike other signalmen, whose cabins are on the margins of normal life, surrounded by railway tracks, embankments and signals, his was in town, right in the middle of town, in fact. That was because his station wasn’t a real station, but a ferry terminal. The boats that arrived from England twice a day, at one in the afternoon and at midnight, moored alongside the platform. The express from Paris, leaving the main station at the other end of town, would cut through the streets like a tram and stop a few metres from the ferry.

There were five tracks in all, and no fences, no embankments, nothing separating the world of rail from the world as a whole.

Maloin had thirty-two steps to climb, and at the top of the ladder was the glass-walled cabin, where his day-shift colleague was already buttoning up his overcoat.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Everything’s fine. Four refrigerated wagons are coming through on track two.’

He wasn’t really listening. And yet he was never to forget the slightest detail of that night. His colleague was wearing a woollen muffler, and it occurred to Maloin that he should get his wife to knit him one, though a darker, more discreet one. He filled his first pipe of the night and put his tobacco pouch down on the table, next to the bottle of purple ink.

It really was a pleasant place, the best vantage point over the whole town. You could see the lights of two stranded trawlers that would return to harbour with the tide. On the land side, close to the covered market, were the bright lights of the Café Suisse, and beyond them, in a swarm, all the shop windows of the town.

Nearer to him, everything was dark and silent, with closed windows and locked doors, except for the colourful door of the Moulin Rouge, through which the musicians had just entered. Maloin knew they would play by

themselves until about ten – the first customers didn't arrive until then. But they played all the same, and the waiters were at their posts.

The cast-iron stove was red. Maloin put his can of coffee down on it, opened his cupboard and got out his bottle of brandy.

He had been doing the same thing, at the same time and in the same place, for nearly thirty years. At nine o'clock, he let four refrigerated wagons through, then the out-of-service locomotive returning to the main station. At ten, he saw the lights go out in his house on the cliff, though they stayed on at the Bernards', who didn't go to bed before eleven.

As always, he was the first to spot the lights of the Newhaven ferry through the darkness of the horizon, just as things were starting to come to life down below his cabin. The four customs officers on duty slowly arrived, followed by the porters, the waiter from the refreshment room and a taxi. The lights came on one by one in the terminal building, and, at the first hoot of the siren from the ferry, the whole platform lit up as if for a party.

Maloin knew that the train would leave the main station in Dieppe well before the ferry enveloped the dock in smoke.

Obviously, his focus was on the train, but unconsciously, while still keeping his eye on what was happening elsewhere, for example Camélia walking towards the Moulin Rouge, coughing before she went in and then again as she closed the door behind her.

The shortest hour of the night was starting. While the doors of the luggage vans were being opened, the ferry advanced between the jetties, turned in the middle of the dock and threw out its hawsers. And as the only people on the platform were staff, everyone had already counted five first-class and twelve second-class passengers.

Maloin poured himself some coffee, added a drop of brandy and filled a third pipe, which he smoked standing up, looking down at the moving figures. Why did he home in on one particular man? As usual, barriers had been set up to stop the passengers from getting away without going through customs. But the man in question had come from town and was standing outside the barriers, just below the signal box, so close that Maloin could have spat on him.

He was wearing a grey overcoat, a grey felt hat and kidskin gloves and was smoking a cigarette. That was all Maloin could make out. The ferry crew, the customs officers and the railway employees were all busy with the

travellers coming across the gangway. Maloin was the only person to notice, apart from his man in grey, a shadowy figure standing in the bow of the ferry, and at that very moment this figure threw something onto the platform.

It was as dazzling in its precision as a piece of acrobatics. Fifty metres from the crowd, a suitcase had just passed to the other side of the barriers, and now the man from town was holding it in his hand, quite naturally, smoking all the while.

He could have left. Nobody would have dreamed of stopping him. But he stayed where he was, a few metres from the express, like any traveller waiting for a friend. The suitcase appeared to be light. It was one of those little fabric cases designed to contain a suit and a little underwear. Henriette had one just like it.

‘What can they possibly have smuggled in?’ Maloin wondered.

Not for a moment did it occur to him to report the two unknown men, one of whom was still invisible. It was none of his business. If he had gone to England, he, too, would have smuggled tobacco or alcohol, it was the done thing.

A young woman was the first to come out of the customs hall and head for a first-class compartment. A fairly elderly man, followed by two porters, took his place in a sleeping car. Almost every day there were wealthy travellers, especially on the night ferry, and from his cabin Maloin had glimpsed ministers, delegates to the League of Nations, actors, film stars. Occasionally photographers turned up and waited for them on the platform.

The man with the suitcase hadn’t moved. He looked more like an Englishman than a Frenchman, though you couldn’t be sure. A traveller emerged at last from the customs hall, a tall, thin man in a beige raincoat, and walked straight towards the waiting man. It was simple. They were in cahoots. The man from London had thrown the suitcase to his accomplice, and now they were shaking hands.

Would they get on the train? Maloin wondered that when he saw them cross the road and go into the Moulin Rouge, from which a brief snatch of music emerged.

The stationmaster blew his whistle. The bell rang in the signal box. Maloin pushed the second lever all the way down, and a few moments later the train set off for the other station, the real one, from where it would leave for Paris.

The lights were switched off and the doors closed. The customs officers walked off in a group. Two of them went into the Café Suisse. On board the ferry, too, the lights went off one by one, except in the stern, where a hoist was noisily extracting crates from the gaping hold.

The ritual was the same every night. For two or three hours you would hear the grating sound of the capstan and see the harsh floodlight aimed at the hold.

Ignoring all that, Maloin took a greater interest in the Moulin Rouge and its multi-coloured windows, behind which the silhouettes of dancers moved.

‘Maybe Camélia will come out with one of the two,’ he told himself.

Because from time to time you would see Camélia leave the place with a companion, turn the first corner, and a moment later you would hear the doorbell of a small hotel. Maloin had gone with her like everyone else, out of curiosity. She was a good girl, always in a good mood, and she always said hello to him when he passed.

‘No, they’re coming out without her,’ he murmured.

He often talked to himself in his cabin. It was almost as if he had company.

‘I bet they’re going to divide it up!’

Instead of heading for the town, the two men crossed the road and then the tracks, until they reached the darkest, most deserted spot, at the edge of the dock, and Maloin smiled, because nobody ever thought of him. Nobody imagined that up there, in that glass cage with its reddish light, there was a man watching! Loving couples were the least likely to think of it, and Maloin had some amusing memories.

He turned away for a moment, picked up his cup of coffee and swallowed a mouthful. He might have missed one or two of the strangers’ moves, but no more than that. When he looked again, the tall, thin man was abruptly, and with amazing speed, hitting his companion’s face.

He was hitting him with his right hand, while still holding the suitcase in his left. His fist was too dark to be bare, as if he had equipped himself with a bludgeon. The capstan was still making its noise.

His face glued to the window pane, Maloin saw the wounded man stagger to the very edge of the dock. He was bound to fall in, and the other man knew that, had calculated his move with that in mind. What he presumably hadn’t foreseen was that his victim, in a gesture that might have been instinctive, would grab hold of the suitcase and tear it from his hands.

There was a splash, then another, weaker one. The man had fallen first, followed by the suitcase. The tall, thin man quickly glanced around, then bent over the water.

It wasn't until several days later that Maloin wondered why he hadn't called for help.

The fact was, he just hadn't thought of it. When you imagine something dramatic, you think you'll do this or that. But when you're there, it's different. In reality, he watched as he would have watched any scene in the street, with curiosity, and it was only when the man straightened up again that he muttered:

'The other one must be dead!'

He had let his pipe go out and he relit it as he looked down at the platform – bad-humouredly, because it was his duty to go down, and he was scared. Does a man who has just killed someone think twice about killing someone else? All the same, he opened his door. Below him, the murderer heard the noise, looked up and quickly strode off in the direction of town.

Heavily, Maloin descended the steps. As he had expected, the water in the dock was still, without the slightest trace of the body or the suitcase. Fifty metres away was the stern of the Newhaven ferry, from which crates were still being unloaded.

Would he go all the way to the Café Suisse, where a policeman was on duty? He hesitated, remembered that he was out of brandy, walked into the Moulin Rouge and sat down at the bar, not far from the door.

'Everything OK?' Camélia asked.

'Everything's fine! I'll have a calvados.'

The band was at the far end, in a pink light, and a few people were dancing. Camélia waited for Maloin to give her a sign, and for a moment he felt like it, then had another calvados and forgot all about it.

He was in a foul mood and he remembered that he had left home in a foul mood, too. This time, it was serious. He hadn't immediately called for help, and he was sure to be blamed for keeping quiet. Not that it was his fault. He simply hadn't thought of it!

'Are you leaving?' Camélia said.

'Yes, I am.'

He looked again at the water in the dock, then climbed back up to his cage, deep in thought. There wouldn't be any point in looking for the body

anyway – the man was well and truly dead. As for the other man, he must be a long way away by now.

Maloin checked the board and cleared track three for more goods wagons. A taxi stopped outside the Moulin Rouge, and two men got out, looking for a good time.

‘After all, it’s none of my business!’ Maloin said out loud.

He stoked the stove and drank the last drop of coffee. It was the worst part of the night, the coldest. The winds were in the east, the sky was clear, and in an hour there would be an unpleasant little frost. There was nothing to do, nothing to look at until the opening of the fish market, which began in darkness and ended in broad daylight.

‘He killed him to keep the suitcase for himself!’ Maloin thought. ‘Now he’s in a real mess!’

What could possibly be in the suitcase? You don’t kill a man for nothing.

It was low tide. In an hour, the water would be no more than three metres deep at the edge of the dock. Or even less – it could be quite deceptive. Maloin frowned, screwed up his nose, scratched his temple and heaved a sigh. There are habits you get into when you live alone for hours on end: you make grimaces and gestures, you grunt, you say a few words from time to time.

‘Why not?’

Obviously, it was cold. But if it was worth it ...

He walked up and down his cabin, still debating with himself. Then he made up his mind, descended the iron ladder and headed for the edge of the platform.

‘Too bad!’ he muttered again.

He took off his shoes and jacket, glanced at the ferry, which was silent now, and dived in. Until his military service he had fished on board a trawler, and then had spent five years in the navy.

He disappeared twice, three times, and each time his hands stirred the warm silt at the bottom. The fourth time, he came across an old steel cable. Only on the fifth attempt, when he was starting to get scared, did he bring up the suitcase.

From one moment to the next, his fear turned to panic. He regretted what he had done. He wondered what would happen if someone caught him and he started running, his jacket over his arm, leaving his shoes on the platform.

He had never climbed the iron ladder so quickly. Water was pouring from the suitcase. He himself was dripping wet. But he had work clothes in his cupboard and was able to change. He still hadn't opened the suitcase and he looked at it warily. He still had to go and get his shoes. He got back to his cage just as the Moulin Rouge was closing.

Camélia was the last out, and she glanced over in his direction to make sure he didn't want her tonight. Meanwhile, he was muttering:

'What am I going to do now?'

Open the suitcase, obviously! It was unavoidable!

If he took it to the police station, they wouldn't understand why he'd acted the way he had, and besides, there might be nothing in the suitcase but contraband tobacco.

It wasn't even locked, and the first thing he saw when he lifted the lid was something soft and wet, a heap of formless cloths. He shook it to see if there was anything else there, and that was when he discovered the banknotes.

It was like with the murder: Maloin began by feeling no emotion and by looking idiotically at the pile of white notes, English five- and ten-pound notes stuck together by the water.

He had seen ten-pound notes before. He himself had five thousand francs and more in the savings bank, and the house he lived in was his.

But it wasn't a matter of ten, or even fifty notes, or any ordinary sum of money. This was a whole suitcase filled with banknotes! It was an incredible sum!

Maloin began by walking around his cage, looking outside. The sea was growing brighter. Lorries and cars were stopping on the other side of the quay, by the fish market, where two bistros had their lights on.

He moved away from the pile of banknotes and, as if it were the most urgent thing to do, emptied the suitcase of the remaining water and set it to dry in front of the fire. Next, he spread his wet trousers on a chair and lit a pipe.

'Maybe even a million!' he said under his breath.

He sat down in front of the notes and counted them one by one, putting the five-pound notes on one side and the ten-pound notes on the other. Dipping his pen in the purple ink, he added and multiplied, reaching the figure of five hundred and forty thousand francs at the approximate rate of exchange.

That was it! There was only five hundred and forty thousand francs. Maloin was already accustomed to this idea. As simply as possible, he made bundles, wrapped them in grey paper, put them away in the suitcase and locked the whole lot in his cupboard.

There were three signalmen, and each one had a little cupboard for keeping his things in.

‘What a mess ...’ he said, smiling despite himself.

All the same, he was a little uncomfortable. For example, he was avoiding making plans or telling himself straight out that he thought this money was his property. He walked once again to the windows, which were getting lighter, and his gaze came to rest on two men discussing something on the other side of the dock. One of them was Baptiste, a fisherman who tended to put out his lines in the harbour and along the jetties. His green-painted boat was called the *Grâce de Dieu*.

The man with whom Baptiste was in conversation was wearing a beige raincoat. He was tall and thin. It was the murderer. He hadn’t had time to sleep and must have spent the night wandering the town.

What could he be saying as he looked at the green boat? Would he have the guts to hire it, go out with Baptiste and drag the bottom with a grappling hook?

Maloin smiled, without knowing why. He wasn’t impressed. Baptiste set off on his own on his boat and pulled in his lines, while the other man stood on the quayside, watching him and occasionally blowing on his cold-stiffened fingers.

An hour passed, and by the end of that hour, the sun had risen and the sea, a pale green now, was covered in points of light like fish scales. The ground-floor window was open in Maloin’s house. His wife was getting breakfast ready for their little boy, who would be setting off for school at seven thirty.

A man was crossing the bridge, and Maloin knew it was his colleague coming to relieve him.

All in all, everything was as it should be. It was a morning like any other. The man in the raincoat went occasionally to the corner of the quayside, then came back to the same spot, held spellbound by part of the dock and by Baptiste’s boat.

On board the ferry, the deck was being hosed down, and the sailors were running barefoot on the streaming floors.

Maloin had five hundred and forty thousand francs in his cupboard, a cupboard made of white wood that wasn't worth fifty francs and needed a new coat of paint. Who could have suspected such a thing?

There was a cracked mirror on the wall. He looked curiously at his own reflection. He was still the same Maloin, with his light complexion, his skin covered in fine lines gouged by sea salt, his greyish eyes, his bushy eyebrows and his increasingly pepper-and-salt moustache.

'Think you're handsome, do you?' his colleague said, putting his can of coffee down on the stove.

Maloin winked.

'You never know.'

He looked at the cupboard. He looked at the green boat and the man from London stamping his feet with impatience on the quayside. It was impossible not to smile. He wasn't doing it deliberately.

'What are we expecting?'

'Ten grocery wagons.'

His eyes laughed, then stopped laughing, then laughed again. It was very complicated. Besides, there was no point thinking about everything all at once. There would be time enough for that later.

As he climbed down the ladder, it occurred to him that his wife would be furious at him because he'd kept his wet socks on inside his shoes. At the corner of the street, near the Café Suisse, he saw his daughter from a distance, on her way to fetch milk for her employers.



Things could have gone like this: Maloin would have gone home calmly and never seen the man from London again. Since he had only glimpsed him at night or, in the morning, from a long way away, he was justified in claiming that he didn't know his face.

But as Maloin skirted the dock, crossed the iron bridge and headed for the cliff, the green boat, instead of continuing fishing, moved in the direction of the fish market, and the man from London, with false nonchalance, approached the spot where it would draw alongside.

Maloin could still have walked on by, but he had just stopped to look at a huge ray, and when he looked up again, the green patch was in front of his eyes, in the sun, with the brown patch of the raincoat in close-up and in the background the blue figure of Baptiste sculling.

'Hello there, Maloin!' someone said, passing with a basket of crabs.

'Hello, Joseph!'

He'd vowed to pass by very quickly. But it was too late. It was the fault of the *Grâce de Dieu*, which they were both looking at. And when two people are both looking at the same thing, it's unusual for them not to glance at each other. There was less than five metres between them. They were separated by a bronze mooring post beaded with frost. The mist that precedes daylight had cleared, and the air was limpid, the colours pale and friendly. Half the scene was taken up by the sea, which didn't have a single ripple, not even a white rim at its edge. The other half was gradually coming to life around the gleaming fish and the growing murmur from deep

in the town, the ringing of bells, the clang of a hammer, the tumble of shutters.

Standing firm on his legs, pipe clamped between his teeth, his railwayman's cap on his head, Maloin was pretending to look at the water, just as so many people are in the habit of looking at the water, but the beige figure never left the right corner of his retina.

'He looks desperate,' he thought.

But it could be that the man from London just wasn't the cheerful type. He had an odd, very thin face, with a long, pointed nose, pale lips and a prominent Adam's apple.

As for guessing his profession, that was difficult. He wasn't a manual worker. He had big, well-tended hands with reddish hairs and square nails. His clothes were like those of most of the English travellers who passed through Dieppe: a brown tweed suit, very simple but well cut, a soft collar, a soft hat and a raincoat of good quality.

Nor was he an office worker. There was something about him that suggested he didn't lead a sedentary life, or even a regular one. He made Maloin think of railway stations, hotels, ports ...

And suddenly Maloin had an idea that might have been a pure guess, but did match his impressions. The man looked like someone in music hall or the circus: a conjurer, maybe, a ventriloquist, even an acrobat.

Baptiste had moored his boat and was putting a basket of conger eels down on the quayside. The man was following his every move with his sad, deep-set eyes, still holding his cigarette between his tobacco-stained fingers.

'Not great!' Baptiste said, indicating his eels.

He was speaking to the man the way a fisherman speaks to any onlooker standing on the quayside.

Was the man going to speak to Baptiste in his turn? Wasn't that why he had been waiting so long? Maloin was sure of it. He knew he was in the way, but he didn't want to leave.

As Baptiste hoisted himself up onto the quayside, the Englishman made a small sideways movement of his thin head and two pairs of eyes met for the first time, anxious, surprised, incapable of looking away.

Maloin was afraid suddenly, afraid of nothing and everything. The man was equally afraid of this railwayman who stood there without moving.

‘I mustn’t look up at the signal box,’ Maloin thought. ‘He’d understand immediately.’

And of course, he looked at it and was sure the other man followed his gaze.

‘He’ll recognize my cap and ...’

It was automatic. The man raised his eyes to the cap.

‘Do you still want to go for a ride?’ Baptiste asked.

Maloin didn’t hear the reply. He fled, clumsily bumping into a woman laden with shrimps, making his way between the groups in the market until he was on the other side of the building. When he looked behind him, he could no longer see the raincoat.

He was sure the man had fled like him, abruptly, for no reason, and was now looking for him at the other end of the market.

He usually went to bed straight after eating, got up at about two and spent the rest of the afternoon fishing or doing odd jobs. Today, he tried to sleep, as he did on other days, but he hadn’t been in his bed for an hour when he got up and gathered his clothes.

‘Do you need something?’ his wife called out, having heard him from downstairs.

He didn’t need anything, but he wasn’t sleepy. While lying in bed with his eyes closed, he had mainly thought about marine currents and made calculations.

When the body had fallen in the water, there were still two hours of ebb tide left. Which meant that, whether the man had been dragged down to the bottom or had drifted just below the surface, he had been carried out to sea.

He wasn’t the first person to drown in Dieppe, and when you know a port well, you can predict almost exactly at which spot a corpse will end up. This one might have got snagged on the piles of the jetties, in which case it wouldn’t be discovered for a long time. Or else it had followed the channel, and the tide would wash it up on the beach further downstream, like the American woman the previous summer.

Maloin laced up his shoes and descended the pitch-pine stairs, which shook beneath his weight, as did the whole house, made as it was of light materials.

‘Are you going out?’ Madame Maloin said in surprise, looking up from her washing.

‘I am.’

That was all she needed to know. He lifted the lid of a saucepan to see what there would be for lunch, thought, as he knotted his scarf, of his colleague’s knitted muffler and stopped in the doorway to fill his pipe.

He could see the beach from where he was, but it was too far for him to be able to make out a body amid the barrows onto which shingle was being loaded.

By the time he walked through the fish market, selling was over for the day and the flagstones were being washed down. On the other side of the dock, his signal box was lit by the sun, and Maloin could clearly see his colleague’s silhouette.

‘Give me a glass of calvados,’ he said, placing his elbows on the counter of a bistro.

Would he run into the clown? That was what he called him now. Strictly speaking, he had no desire to ever see him again, and yet, once he was back out in the street, he kept looking around, searching for him.

The seafront was deserted, and the big hotels were closed for the winter, with their shutters up or their window panes marked with chalk. The casino was closed, too, as were the luxury shops around it. This was an area Maloin never visited, in summer because he didn’t fit in, in winter because he had nothing to do here. A few mothers were walking their children along the seafront. A dump truck passed, laden with shingle, and on the beach men were shifting more of it with shovels.

Maloin walked slowly, his hands in his pockets, smoking his pipe, looking like an honest worker out for a bit of fresh air. He gazed with apparent calm at the tideline, which was fringed with kelp.

There was no corpse to be seen. From a distance, a single heap of seaweed might, at a pinch, pass for a body. He went and took a closer look at it, and even gave it a kick. He returned to the seafront without raising his head, and it was only as he climbed the steps that he found himself face to face with his clown.

As had happened that morning, their eyes met immediately. There was definitely more terror in those of the Englishman. Maloin noticed that his nose was bluish with cold and that his lips were making his cigarette tremble.

If he had carried on up the steps, they would have rubbed against each other as they passed. So Maloin, as embarrassed as if telling a lie, turned

and pretended to gaze at the sea. He listened. He heard footsteps growing fainter. When he made an about-turn, the man from London was already some distance away, walking with such long strides that he looked like a grasshopper.

What kind of person was he? He didn't look like a thug. On the contrary, he looked rather like a poor, unhealthy wretch, someone who leads a solitary life.

All the same, he had brought a suitcase containing five hundred and forty thousand francs all the way from London and had killed his partner in order not to share it.

As for the dead man ... Now that he thought of it, Maloin had no idea what the dead man might have been like. He had only seen him from a distance, in the dark. He knew he'd been dressed in grey and was a little more corpulent than the other man. That was all!

He passed the Newhaven Hotel, the only hotel on the seafront that was still open, catering as it did for commercial travellers. The clown had disappeared behind the casino, and Maloin had no desire to see him again.

'I have five hundred and forty thousand francs,' he told himself in an unconvincing attempt to dispel the unease weighing him down.

He was a hundred metres from the butcher's shop where his daughter worked as a domestic. Wasn't it strange? He didn't see her as he passed, since she was in the kitchen, but Madame Laîné, who was sitting at the till, nodded in his direction.

'You have no idea I'm richer than you are!' he grunted.

Why was he in a foul mood, then? He went into the Café Suisse, telling himself that an aperitif or two would buck him up. It was almost midday. Travellers were arriving for the one o'clock ferry, and the same manoeuvres as during the night were taking place. After two drinks, he felt the need to go to his cabin, where he arrived out of breath.

'What are you doing here?' the day-shift man asked in surprise.

Maloin looked at him suspiciously. He sensed it was the wrong thing to do, but he couldn't help himself.

'Does it bother you, seeing me?'

'Why should it bother me?'

'You look like it does!'

The bell rang. The signalman cleared track three, while Maloin looked at his cupboard. He'd have liked to say something, to wipe out the bad

impression he had made. He couldn't think of anything. And besides, he didn't want to look as if he was making the first move. But why was his colleague so quiet?

He waited two minutes, three minutes, standing in the middle of the cabin, pretending to watch a trawler coming back to port. Finally, he heaved a sigh and left without another word.

'Too bad!' he grunted as he climbed down the iron ladder.

The door of the Moulin Rouge was open. Two women were washing the floor, and the owner, who had previously been a barman in Paris, was cleaning the mirror behind the bar with whiting.

Maloin went home. In passing, he bought a newspaper, which he opened at the table.

'What's going on?' his wife asked.

'Nothing.'

There might be something in the paper, even if only a few lines about the suitcase, or a robbery committed in England, or counterfeit money.

At this thought, his brow furrowed. What if the money was counterfeit? He couldn't imagine a burglar, or even a con man, looking like the clown. But what about a forger who operates out of a cellar, doing precision work, handling inks and acids?

'What's the matter with you?' his wife asked.

What was the matter with him? He was furious! Or rather, he was afraid that he might end up furious, because if the money was counterfeit ...

'Aren't you eating any more?'

'No!'

As long as she didn't bombard him with questions! He couldn't keep seated. Once he was standing, he felt like walking. And he didn't know where to go.

Weren't they at least going to find the body? It would be getting dark soon, which meant it wouldn't happen until tomorrow now. Maybe the drowned man had got snagged on one of the old ropes lying at the bottom of the dock, in which case it was hopeless: he would be fished out in a month, or never!

'Why isn't Ernest here?'

'You're forgetting today's the day he eats at his aunt's.'

He walked back to town. At three thirty, the lights were already coming on in the shop windows, as were the street lamps. The light also came on in

the signal box, near the ferry terminal. For about a quarter of an hour Maloin felt sleepy, but it passed.

He finally settled into a corner of the Café Suisse, where at least there was music from a phonograph. Sitting facing him, in the opposite corner, was Camélia, smartly dressed, with a fox fur around her neck. He smiled at her. She gave him a little sign and he almost suggested they leave together. That at least would kill an hour. What made him hesitate was that he only had about twenty francs in his pocket.

How could he find out if the money in the suitcase was counterfeit or not? He couldn't take a note to the bank. If only the newspapers ...

He opened the Paris papers, which had just arrived, and for a while sat huddled in his corner, in the warmth, enveloped by music. People were playing dominoes at the next table. The sleepiness took hold of him again, but it wasn't unpleasant.

The door opened. It had already opened twenty times without his taking any notice, but this time he looked up abruptly and saw his clown come in and sit down at one of the tables.

They were less than three metres from each other. The Englishman hadn't seen him. When the waiter approached, he said:

'A cognac.'

Any moment now, he would turn his head and spot Maloin. The only thing stopping him was that Camélia unhesitatingly sat down beside him and held out her hand.

'Where's your friend?' she asked point-blank. 'He said he'd meet me at four. It's almost five.'

Maloin heard. He was afraid of what was going to happen. He had the feeling this was bound to end in an outburst. Looking away from Camélia, the man from London saw Maloin, and there was a brief glint of terror in his eyes.

'I don't know. I think he left for Paris.'

He had an accent, although not a strong one. He spoke slowly, without taking his eyes off Maloin. Camélia touched his arm, obliging him to turn to her.

'What's he gone to Paris for?'

Caught in the crossfire, the clown remained calm, and even tried to smile.

'How should I know? Teddy didn't tell me everything.'

Maloin made a new discovery: the man had bad teeth, perhaps yellowed by tobacco.

‘Waiter!’ he called.

‘Are you sure Teddy isn’t still in Dieppe?’

It was as if Camélia suspected the truth. There was a stern look in her eyes that Maloin wouldn’t have liked to see aimed at him.

‘Five francs fifty, with madame’s drink.’

He paid, without looking at Maloin, and went out through the other door in order not to turn to him. Left alone, Camélia put on powder and lipstick and also called the waiter.

‘Joseph, if anyone asks for me, say I couldn’t wait any longer ... All he has to do is come to the Moulin Rouge tonight, I’ll be there.’

When a man in a raincoat walked into the Newhaven Hotel, the owner’s wife, Madame Dupré, who sat enthroned at the desk at the far end of the lobby, turned to a peephole that communicated with the pantry.

‘Germain! Lay the table for Monsieur Brown.’

She smiled at Brown as he hung his raincoat on the coat stand.

‘Did you have a nice walk? I don’t think you’re warmly enough dressed for the season. The winds are damp here in Dieppe.’

He nodded and smiled too, or, rather, gave a small semblance of a smile and turned to the bar.

‘Germain!’ Madame Dupré called again. ‘Monsieur Brown wants you at the bar.’

She was a fat, cheerful woman, and being friendly came naturally to her.

‘A whisky, Monsieur Brown?’ Germain asked, the bottle already in his hand.

The man from London had sat down in a leather armchair. It was clear that he was at a loose end. He was staring straight ahead without thinking, or, if he was thinking about something, there was no trace of it on his face.

Madame Dupré thought him distinguished, firstly because he was tall and thin, and secondly because he didn’t speak much and never laughed.

‘Are you planning to stay with us much longer, Monsieur Brown?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps.’

‘If you’d like some special dish, don’t hesitate to ask. In winter, my husband has time.’

He nodded.

‘What time do you usually get up? We can bring you your breakfast in bed.’

He politely smiled again. He drank his whisky, stood up with a sigh, walked his tall body around the lobby, then folded it again into an armchair, although this time it was an armchair in the lounge.

‘Germain! Go and put the light on.’

Brown was still staring ahead sadly, and when he sat down alone at a table, not far from two commercial travellers, nobody suspected that he had only one pound sterling left in his pocket.

Maloin didn’t even notice, at dinner, that his son had his elbows on the table.

‘I think you’re coming down with the flu,’ his wife ventured to say.

‘You’re always thinking stupid things,’ he retorted.

He took his can of coffee and his slices of bread and butter, kissed both his wife and son on the forehead and put his cap on.

Madame Maloin would have been quite surprised if anyone had told her that her husband was scared! And scared of the dark to boot!

The slope leading down to the quayside wasn’t lighted. He went down in such a hurry that he almost slipped. At the same time, he was thinking that his wife’s idea wasn’t such a bad one as all that.

All he had to do was have the flu! He’d be given a week off.

The lights of the quays were reflected in the dock, where Baptiste was pushing the *Grâce de Dieu* towards the jetties in order to bring in his lines and his lobster pots.

‘Hello, Maloin!’

The voice rose from the humid darkness, where the little light on the boat quivered, a light that appeared distant even though it was quite close.

‘Hello, Baptiste!’

Maloin might have been more alert if he had slept. As he passed the Café Suisse, he glanced inside, but his Englishman wasn’t there. He was quite surly – and two minutes late – by the time he entered his cabin, and he took up his place without saying a word to his colleague.

The lights were on in the Moulin Rouge. The musicians were arriving. Maloin sat down next to the stove and looked at his levers.



When he walked into the kitchen the following morning, dragging his feet, his wife didn't need to look at him to say:

'You see, you *are* coming down with the flu! I was right after all.'

She wasn't right at all, since he didn't have the flu, but her exclamation proved to Maloin that he was looking ill. His wife did indeed have a particular flair for detecting when something was wrong, preferably something unsavoury, shameful or simply embarrassing. She was the first to notice a pimple on someone's face or sense when Ernest was telling a lie.

'Don't eat too much. I'll make you a hot toddy.'

Usually when he got home, he ate reheated meat and potatoes, but this time he didn't even take his place at the table, just looked around bad-temperedly and headed for the stairs.

He had never felt so tired. It was worse than tiredness: his whole body ached, his head hurt, his eyes smarted. Above all, he felt as nauseous as after the worst of his benders.

'Leave me be!' he said to his wife when she made to follow him upstairs.

He didn't want to see her prowling around his bed, dispensing advice and sympathy.

'Wouldn't you like a toddy?'

By way of reply, he kicked the door shut. The foghorn was bursting his eardrums. The room was cold. He threw one shoe to the left, the other to the right and his trousers over the back of a chair, then stood there for a moment in his shirt, staring down at his feet.

Was he going to start thinking again? Hadn't the whole of last night been enough? Slyly, as if he was up to no good, he walked barefoot to the window and opened it abruptly, making the wood creak.

It was quite foggy outside, but that didn't prevent Maloin, his torso bursting out of the window like a jack-in-the-box, spotting the man some fifty metres from the house.

He was pleased he'd given him a fright. He was in no doubt he'd given him a fright by suddenly opening the window and half-emerging above the street. This was proved by the fact that the Englishman, without turning, hurtled down the slope in the direction of the town ...

Maloin got into bed, talking to himself as he did in his signal box.

'I have to sleep, or I won't stick it out!'

What a night he had had! Nothing dramatic had happened, nothing to write home about. The previous night had been a thousand times more dramatic, with a man being killed a few metres from Maloin, and yet it had left no impression on him.

Was it because he was now acquainted with the murderer? Not that he'd spoken to him! He didn't know his name, or his profession, or why he had killed, or whether he had stolen or forged the money. He knew nothing at all about him, and yet he was acquainted with him!

To such an extent that his face was already more familiar than his brother-in-law's, for example, even though he'd seen his brother-in-law once a month for the past fifteen years.

Up until midnight, the quays had remained empty, and the arrival of the Newhaven ferry had taken place as usual, rather quietly since there were very few passengers. At that time, the night was still clear, but it was as if the ferry had brought the fog with it: the mist started to skim the water, then rose slowly, white in the moonlight.

As he had nothing to do, Maloin had stoked his little stove so full that the cast iron was red, and it was necessary to open a window. That often happened to him: when all the windows were shut, he felt as if he was deaf. With the windows open, he heard the slightest noises and recognized all of them. Even when not paying attention to them, he would say to himself:

'Ah, the *Francette* is leaving the harbour. They'll have good weather for trawling.'

Or else:

'That's Monsieur Babu coming back in his car!'

That was the only way he knew him. He was a ship owner who often went to Le Havre and back by car. Since his house was near the ferry terminal, Maloin would hear the engine, but that was all.

Salted meat was being unloaded from the stern of the ferry, but the creaking of the capstan didn't stop him becoming aware of other, weaker, more distant sounds – so much so that, at about one, Maloin heard the water lapping on the other side of the dock, where Baptiste moored his boat.

He knew immediately what was happening. The only question was whether Baptiste was on board with the stranger or not. When the boat got to the middle of the dock, it was possible to make out – the mist still being transparent – that there was only one man in it: the Englishman.

He was no sailor, he didn't know how to scull. As there was only one oar, he must have been ill at ease, especially as he was trying not to make a noise. He gave a stroke of the oar to the right, then one to the left, and despite his precautions the oar knocked the side each time. The boat wasn't going straight. It was strange to see a man in a soft hat trying his best to steer the small boat in the mist.

Maloin had begun by watching curiously, but gradually it became an obsession, stopping him from looking away, from seeing or hearing anything else. At the same time, even though the fog was growing thicker, and the boat and the man were sometimes nothing but a halo, he could see them, especially the man's face, in the smallest detail.

He couldn't have described the features of his brother-in-law's face, or even his wife's, so clearly, not without some bits being vague, or even missing altogether.

The boat moved forwards in fits and starts, and Maloin was sure that the man with the pointed nose was looking at the water with his sad eyes, at once anxious and resigned. When the shadowy figure straightened up, he knew it was to look up at the signal box, hanging in the sky like a paper lantern.

The boat reached the spot where the suitcase had fallen, and the man pulled in the oar and stood up, his movements made clumsy and hesitant by the motion of the boat.

Maloin could make out every gesture: the Englishman untangling the line, the grappling hook catching on the side as it went down, then making contact with the water.

The first howl of the foghorn echoed at the end of the jetty. Within ten minutes the fog had invaded every nook and cranny, even the lighted door of the Moulin Rouge.

Maloin could have taken the opportunity to think about something else, to read his paper or doze by the stove.

He remained standing by the window, moderating his breathing in order not to miss a single sound and frowning whenever a creaking of the capstan covered the lapping of the water.

The man was fifteen metres from him, as the crow flies. He wasn't familiar with the rhythm of the tides and it hadn't occurred to him that the ebb tide was slowly carrying him out to sea.

He kept dipping the grappling hook in the water, but when he looked around he realized that he was no longer in the same place. Once, he even bumped into the Navy tugboat. Baptiste, Maloin or anyone else would have kept the boat steady by sculling with one hand and wielding the grappling hook with the other.

The fog was as white and cold as ice, almost as if it were solid, and several times Maloin almost coughed. What would have happened then? The man would have looked up, because in the fog noises seem even closer than they are in reality. He might have let go of the line and lost the grappling hook, or even let his oar slip into the water and drifted towards the jetties.

Would he have had the courage to cry out?

He didn't dare remain standing, for fear of losing balance. But once he was seated, he was less free in his movements and kept searching for a better position.

Angrily, Maloin let through a line of wagons and resumed his place at the window.

Not for an instant did he think about the dead man, who didn't interest him, or rather, was no concern of his. He hadn't even seen him! He had glimpsed an overcoat, a hat, a figure swaying at the edge of the quay.

Anyway, the dead man didn't need the suitcase any more, being dead.

Whereas the clown must really need it! It was quite incredible. After all, he had actually committed a murder, in this same place, the previous night! He had no idea if the body had been found, or if anyone had witnessed the scene and talked about it!

There was no way he wouldn't have thought about that, and yet, instead of leaving Dieppe on the first train or first boat, he was still here, looking like someone who was worried sick!

He had already been worried sick in the morning, looking longingly at Baptiste's boat in the dock. Maloin had known from that moment that he would be back, but he nevertheless felt a shiver down his spine as the Englishman stubbornly moved about in the damp darkness. Did he even know how to swim?

'He has to keep going!'

Maloin could have shrugged, or at least smiled, given that the money was in the cupboard. Instead of which, he felt bad about it. He was getting impatient hearing the clown searching the water with his ridiculous grappling hook. What if, instead of the suitcase, he hooked the body? Then he'd really be in a fix!

Could it be that he didn't even have enough on him to leave Dieppe? Had the money been intended for someone else?

It was the first night that Maloin had forgotten to smoke his pipe. He heard voices coming from the direction of the Moulin Rouge and recognized Camélia's. The door was closed. The shutter came down. The last footsteps were those of the waiter, who lived on the other side of the water, not far from Maloin.

It's fraught enough, hearing a rat gnawing at a wall for hours. But hearing a man gnawing at the water and the fog! And knowing it was pointless, that he wouldn't find anything! And imagining that odd nose of his puckered in despair!

Maloin could have told himself that it served him right, but he didn't think of it and after a while he was choking with impatience.

Once, he took the key from his pocket, opened the cupboard and laid the suitcase on the table. It was dry, with traces of damp that recalled the contours on a map. There were the same yellowish splotches on the notes. And the little strokes of the oar were still audible.

Maybe all he had to do was call out, 'Hey, you there! Catch!' and throw him a handful of notes. Would he give up then?

'I can't do that!' Maloin sighed, closing the suitcase, nearly leaving his key on the table.

When he noticed, he turned pale, realizing suddenly that he was at the mercy of a memory lapse, a chance occurrence, a blunder. His colleague

would have found the key and said to himself:

‘Well, well! Maybe Maloin has better brandy than I do.’

Maloin had done that himself: drunk from his friends’ bottles and replaced the amount he had drunk with water.

Thinking of water, Maloin imagined the Englishman’s hands dragging in the dock. They must be red with cold by now. The man wasn’t used to vigorous exercise, despite the way he had landed that punch.

Had he planned to drown his partner when he arrived from London? Or had they quarrelled over their drinks at the Moulin Rouge?

The most irritating thing was the noise the grappling hook made whenever it entered the water, every two or three minutes. Basically it was the same splashing sound hundreds of times over! And over and above everything, the foghorn, which also had its rhythm, the most powerful of all, powerful enough to crush the town, beside which the noise of the capstan was just a trivial little tune.

By four in the morning, Maloin would have given half the money to see the boat move away. And yet when, at four fifteen, he heard the crash of the oar and realized that the *Grâce de Dieu* was crossing the dock, he felt an emptiness and a growing sense of unease.

There was no longer much to see. The hull of the boat barely made a dent in the fog. Only the sounds revealed anything, like the noise of the chain when the man moored the boat, then his steps along the quayside, over the iron bridge, and along the quayside again. Maloin said:

‘He’s coming here!’

To get back to the town, the Englishman should have turned the corner of the Café Suisse, and in that case the sound would have faded away. Instead, it grew closer, reaching the foot of the iron ladder.

As a precaution, Maloin sat down. It had occurred to him that, with the cabin being lit, his silhouette could be seen and he would be an easy target for a man with a gun.

He was no sooner sitting at his table covered in torn blotting paper than the ladder shook. Someone had touched it. Someone had put his foot on the bottom rung.

He held his breath. He didn’t have a gun. Not that he would have fired at the man from London for anything in the world. He didn’t know why, but that was the way it was.

‘If he doesn’t come up, I’ll give five hundred francs to the chapel,’ he decided.

He meant the chapel that had been built at the top of the cliff, not far from his house. It was where the sailors’ wives went to pray when the boats hadn’t come back.

‘I’ll give it once I’ve exchanged the notes,’ he corrected himself, thinking that he wouldn’t be able to divert five hundred francs from the housekeeping money without arousing his wife’s suspicion.

Below, the Englishman was hesitating. It was only natural. Maybe someone had told him that the man he had met three times during the day was the night signalman. Could he even have followed Maloin?

Had it crossed his mind that the suitcase had been fished out?

There they were, the two of them, very close to each other, their minds preoccupied by the same subject, neither knowing what the other knew or was thinking.

‘If he comes, I’ll give him back the suitcase.’

The man had climbed two rungs.

‘He’ll give me part of it for my pains.’

Maloin could have cried out. But he was strong. On four or five occasions, he had got into a fight in a bar without thinking twice.

The terrible part was that he could still imagine the clown’s thin, lugubrious face appearing at any moment at the top of the ladder.

No! He had given up. He was walking away. Gravel scrunched beneath his feet. Was he even more scared than Maloin? Or had he just been startled by the bell announcing the arrival of wagons? Maloin noisily pushed his levers, unleashing a distant clatter of the rails with a satisfaction that these manoeuvres had never before given him.

The lights were coming on in the small cafés by the fish market. The night was almost at an end. Another hour of darkness at most, an hour during which Maloin hadn’t the slightest idea what his companion was doing: he had disappeared, melted into the increasingly milky fog. The noises now were merely the familiar noises of the harbour and the town.

One thing that helped to kill time was the return of two fishing boats that couldn’t see in front of them and which advanced at a snail’s pace, their sirens blaring. When they were in between the jetties, the voices of the look-outs bending over the sterns could be heard.

Maloin filled his first pipe and poured himself a glass of brandy, actually his colleague's brandy, from the bottle which he had left near the stove just as Maloin had nearly left the key.

The day was getting into gear. Because it was a mechanism now, one that left no room for the unexpected: the bell of the market, the coaches being coupled, the vans, the piled-up baskets that made a very distinctive creaking noise – a sound of crumpled wicker – the murmur of voices, the wet fish flopping on the flagstones.

The train transporting the fish inland had to be shunted, and by the time Maloin had stoked the stove one last time it was daylight, although the fog was so thick that visibility was scarcely better than during the night.

Cars passed with their headlights on. Windows lit up in houses, always the same houses, the same people who got up early.

'Are you all right?' his colleague asked, opening the door.

'Fine!' he replied, forgetting that the day before they had been short with each other.

He looked at his cupboard, made sure he had the key in his pocket and climbed down the ladder; the iron rungs were covered in cold condensation.

He had just got beyond the ferry terminal when he spotted the man ahead of him, standing by the kerb, his raincoat spattered with water, his hat twisted out of shape, his hands in his pockets. The man was looking at him. He was waiting for him. It looked as if he was going to take a couple of steps forwards and speak to him.

Maloin wouldn't have run away. He wouldn't have made any move to defend himself. He was resigned in advance. He would listen, do as he was told, even go and fetch the suitcase from the signal box. Couldn't that be inferred from his attitude?

But in spite of everything, the man didn't step forwards, didn't speak. His eyes feverish, his nostrils puckered by the cold, a resentful turn to his mouth, he watched Maloin pass.

Maloin stumbled. He was walking unsteadily, expecting to receive a blow, or something similar to happen. He turned left because he was so used to it, he would have done it with his eyes closed. He didn't dare turn round, but it was almost a relief to finally hear the man's footsteps behind him.

The taxi drivers were at their posts. A policeman was walking up and down the pavement.

Nothing could be done to him! He was safe!

When he started stepping in fish entrails, he knew that he was crossing the market, but he saw nothing, at least no details, because not only was there fog around him, his head was full of it.

The man was following him, the man was climbing the steep path, and now his wife was saying as gravely as she could:

‘You see, you *are* coming down with the flu!’

A proper bout of the flu was right up her street. It was her opportunity to make herbal teas, to look even sadder than usual and to prod their son without his father intervening. He was aching, drained, shattered and yet he absolutely had to think.

Not to think like his wife, who debated for three days the purchase of a saucepan or Ernest’s violin lessons, a violin they had talked about in the house and at his brother-in-law’s for a year or more.

To think! The man may have left, but he might be prowling around the house. He knew that Maloin knew! Or at least that Maloin might know!

It was too late to take the suitcase to the police. Even if it weren’t too late, Maloin would only reluctantly make up his mind to do that.

If the Englishman stayed in Dieppe, what would happen? Would he keep showing his clown’s face on every street corner?

Maloin stood up and opened the window again, as abruptly as the first time, but all he saw was a fisherman’s wife – Baptiste’s wife in fact – selling fish from door to door. He looked down at his wife haggling over herrings. More herrings!

He had slept a little. Through the fog, it was now possible to make out the yellowish disc of the sun.

The previous day, at the same time, Maloin had been outside, which wasn’t his usual routine. Perhaps because it had been exceptional, he had kept a pleasant memory of that walk, especially the drinks he had had at the Café Suisse, which wasn’t a bistro but the finest café in town.

It’s easier to think outdoors, surrounded by noise and crowds and movement. You don’t make mountains out of molehills. He got dressed, and at the noise, as he’d expected, his wife came running.

‘I hope you’re not thinking of going out.’

He’d have liked to avoid a scene, but it was impossible.

‘Leave me alone!’

‘And then you’ll come back and complain that you’re ill! And I’ll be the one who’ll have to look after you ...’

Isn’t it odd how you can live twenty-two years with a woman, have children together, share the money and when it comes down to it still be strangers? It was her fault, she understood nothing and always complained. She found it hard to accept that on the days when he went and played skittles he came back a little tipsy, and she had never asked him if he had won; worse still, she was the only person who didn’t know that he was the best player in Dieppe!

‘Trust me, Louis—’

‘That’s enough!’

These days, she was more or less used to it, but when they were first married and he said something like that, she would cry for three days running.

‘It’s me who keeps us going, isn’t it?’ he said, looking her straight in the eyes. ‘It’s me who works! It’s me who puts food on the table! What if tomorrow I told you we were rich? Eh? What if tomorrow I showed you hundreds of thousands of francs?’

He was challenging her. She retreated, not upset, just wanting to put an end to the scene. It was the opposite of what he was looking for.

‘Maybe you don’t think I could, is that it? It’s what you think, isn’t it? Your brother-in-law’s the only smart one, because he works in a bank! Just you wait: I’ll give him some money to put in his bank.’

For now, he was relieved, and he put on his best suit of thick blue serge, the kind that fishermen wear on Sundays.

‘You’ve forgotten your handkerchief,’ she said.

‘I haven’t forgotten anything at all, get that into your head!’

He was tempted to smile at himself in the mirror. Instead, he shrugged and left. Outside the house, there was only a small stretch of pavement, because there wasn’t yet a real street. He avoided walking in the puddles with his clean shoes. At the top of the steep path, he met Ernest coming back from school and kissed his cold cheek.

‘Hurry up! Your mother’s waiting for you.’

At last he walked down towards the dock, telling himself he had to think. Every now and again he looked around, surprised and worried not to see the man.



It was about four thirty – the street lamps had been on for a while – when Maloin saw the Englishman coming out of the post office. He hurried so as to follow him at a distance, and the two of them walked along like that, past the shop windows.

What had the man been doing since the morning? Had he slept? Had he prowled around the dock some more? It was unlikely, because then he would have met Maloin, who had passed by there a dozen times.

He was walking fast. It was cold and still very foggy. The foghorn kept moaning at the end of the jetty.

After the antique shop, the man turned right, and that was almost it. A stretch of alleyway led to the seafront, a short distance from the Newhaven Hotel. The hotel had two frosted-glass globes out front, floating in the fog like moons. To the left, in pitch darkness, you could smell the breath of the sea.

Was the Englishman aware that he was being followed? He didn't turn, simply walked faster, but that might have been because he had almost reached his destination.

The first thing you came to in the hotel was a wide entrance hall furnished with chairs, armchairs and coat stands. At the end, this hall became wider still and turned into a lobby, with a desk on the left and an American bar on the right.

A man was sitting in a rattan armchair, his bowler hat on his knees. He was so calm, looking straight ahead so patiently, that he might have been

sitting on a train. What he was looking at was the lighted hall, with the wall of damp darkness at the other end.

He saw the Englishman's raincoat emerge from the shadows. From where she was, Madame Dupré, who was making up a bill, could see nothing, but she had the knack of recognizing people from their footsteps.

'That's Monsieur Brown,' she said, smiling.

When Brown was halfway along the hall, a shorter figure out on the pavement was lit up briefly, hung there for a few moments, then disappeared. It was Maloin.

The man from London didn't know anyone was waiting for him, and he had his head down as he walked. When he looked up, he was no more than three metres from the rattan armchair. His nose puckered and his thin mouth twisted in a small grimace that he tried to turn into a smile. The visitor, who had got to his feet, held out his hand and said in English:

'Pleased to meet you, Mr Brown.'

Had Brown also held out his hand, or had the other man taken it by force? In any case, he gave it a long, vigorous shake, as if he didn't want to let go of it again.

Madame Dupré kindly explained:

'Your friend got here just after you went out. In this fog, he thought it was best to wait rather than try and find you in town.'

Brown turned to her and again attempted a grateful grimace.

'Would you like me to put the light on for you in the lounge?'

It was a windowed room to the left of the lobby, opposite the dining room, which was on the right. Madame Dupré pressed some buttons on a board, and the room lit up, as grey and sad as a dentist's waiting room, with the same kinds of magazines on the table. Without wasting any time, Madame Dupré opened the hatch into the pantry.

'Germain! See what these gentlemen would like to drink.'

The visitor had finally let go of Brown's hand. Brown stood there in front of him without saying anything, without doing anything, as if all initiative had been taken from him.

'A whisky, Monsieur Brown?' Germain hastened to ask. 'And you, monsieur?'

'Make that two whiskies.'

They walked into the lounge, and Brown took off his raincoat, while his companion sat down in an armchair and crossed his legs.

‘Surprised to see me, Mr Brown?’

They were the same age, but the man in the bowler hat had such self-confidence it made him aggressive. Germain served the whisky. The two companions didn’t close the door: they could relax more like this, provided they didn’t talk too loudly. It was the visitor who opened fire.

‘I’d be lying if I said I didn’t expect to see you in Dieppe, because I know you’re in the habit of taking a little trip to the continent every now and again.’

Brown said nothing, didn’t even seem willing to take part in the conversation. He was looking at the other man with his sad eyes, his hands crossed on his lap.

‘By the way, I assume you met your friend Teddy? No? Did you miss each other? And yet he was reported as being in Dieppe when you arrived.’

Through the windows, they could see Madame Dupré preparing the bills for two travellers and occasionally throwing a glance in their direction.

‘You look tired, Mr Brown. Feeling ill, perhaps? Is your liver still bothering you?’

Brown sighed, crossed his legs the other way and joined his hands on one knee.

‘You know something?’ the other man went on. ‘I had a hell of a job stopping old Mitchell from coming with me.’

Brown didn’t react, remaining glum and as impassive as ever. It was his companion, impatient by now, who stood up and walked round the lounge twice. Passing behind Brown, he suddenly placed his hands on his shoulders. This time, there was a shudder, but a brief one, and only one. He didn’t uncross his legs.

‘Let’s put our cards on the table, Mr Brown!’

He sat down again, less casual now, almost cordial.

‘You know old Mitchell as well as I do. Come to think of it, he already owned the Palladium fifteen years ago, when you were starting out in music hall, and if I remember correctly he hired you several times. A fine theatre! Especially that wonderful façade, with its big grey stones. You can just picture it, can’t you? The pavement all lit up, the cars parking by the front steps, the two policemen on guard, the doorman, the bellboys ... Above the main door, the neon letters announcing the show. Quite dazzling! So dazzling that what’s behind them is left completely in the shadows ... The

wall, for example, in other words, the whole section of the façade that's above the mezzanine.'

Brown lit a cigarette, with precise movements, and put his hands back on his knees.

'You know Mitchell's office too, don't you? It's all the way up at the top of the theatre, on the same level as the gallery. Mitchell has never wanted to move his office, even though none of the performers like climbing an iron staircase up six or seven floors or whatever it is.'

Madame Dupré was giving orders to Germain, who began laying the tables in the dining room.

He appeared for a moment at the door of the lounge and asked:

'Will you gentlemen be eating together?'

'Of course!'

Brown hadn't replied.

'Anyway, as you know, Mr Brown, last Saturday Mitchell decided to sell his theatre to a film company. It was in all the papers, people upset about the old music hall disappearing. You may also know that the sale took place at three o'clock in Mitchell's office and that the buyers immediately made a down payment of five thousand pounds. It's very odd, because they say Mitchell only gave in so as to provide a dowry for his daughter. But that's no concern of ours right now. Let's concentrate on Saturday afternoon and evening.

'The banknotes are in Mitchell's safe, because the banks are closed. The matinee's over, and Mitchell, as usual, doesn't even leave the theatre to have dinner, but eats sandwiches at his bar. You know the bar, don't you? It's the one on the first floor, facing front, with the windows just behind the neon sign. One of those windows is always half open, because of all the pipe and cigarette smoke.

'At eight o'clock in the evening, the money's still in the safe. At eight thirty, Mitchell goes downstairs, takes the day's takings from the till and carries them up to his office. At the foot of the iron staircase that leads to his office, there's always an employee whose job is to not let anyone through. A few yards from his office, up in the gallery, Mitchell has made a little area for himself from where he can see both the auditorium and the stage.'

Brown was listening meekly.

‘I’ve finished, or almost. But follow carefully. Mitchell has left his office and spends exactly twenty minutes in the gallery. By the time he gets back, the safe is empty. Nobody’s been up or down the staircase. The employee on guard is sure of that. On the other hand, I learn a little later that good old Brown had a glass of beer at the bar.

‘Are you with me? The only way to have got in was through the façade, in other words, climbing up the wall using the joins between the stones. Now, only one man, in my opinion, is capable of a feat like that. Which brings me to the reason I’m here ...’

Raised voices announced the arrival of a group of commercial travellers, who, instead of coming into the lounge, installed themselves at the bar. Brown had once again crossed and uncrossed his legs.

‘Old Mitchell isn’t a bad man They say he’s made a tidy fortune out of all the acts he’s booked over the last thirty years, first in the provinces, then in London. I can honestly tell you that’s not the case, and that the five thousand pounds he received are pretty much all he has left to provide a dowry for his daughter and see out the rest of his days.

‘He called me to his office, the office you know. He told me he didn’t care about punishing the thief, but that he wanted at all costs to get his money back, at least part of it. Do you understand?’

Brown’s throat must have been dry: he took a slug of whisky, then kept it in his mouth for a while before swallowing it.

‘We’re in France, so you’re sitting pretty. Mitchell would be content to get back the five thousand pounds and forget about the takings for the two Saturday shows.’

There was a silence. The click of balls could be heard from the billiard table near the bar, but neither the game nor the players were visible. As for the foghorn on the jetty, it was merely part of the sonorous atmosphere, a vague, deep background noise.

‘Do you know, Mr Brown, what I, Inspector Mollison, said in reply to poor old Mitchell? I said this, word for word: “I’m going to see if I can’t track down an odd customer known at the Yard as Mr Hard Luck. He’s the most nimble fellow there is, and this isn’t the first time he’s walked on walls as easily as a fly. The first time, he had to abandon his loot as he was escaping across the rooftops. The second time, he was attacked in the street on his way home, and the third time the equities he’d stolen were fake.” I also said this: “If I find him at home, in Newhaven, with his nice little wife

who already has two kids, the negotiations will be easy because, basically, Mr Hard Luck wouldn't harm a fly. But if, when I shake his hand, he's had time to join a man named Teddy, it'll be a lot trickier." By the way, have you seen Teddy?'

Brown was burning his fingers on the end of his cigarette, of which there was hardly anything left.

'How much did you say there was?' he sighed.

Inspector Mollison banged on the table to ask for whisky.

'In all, nearly six thousand pounds.'

'You looked in my room, of course.'

'I asked for the room next to it, telling the lady over there what great friends we are. I don't think your door was properly locked.'

'Did you go to my house in Newhaven?'

'Your wife made me a cup of tea. She was busy bathing the kids. The older one's very strong for his age.'

'What did she tell you?'

'That your bosses had sent you to Amsterdam again. It's not nice to lie like that to your wife. By the way, there was a gas bill on the dresser. When your wife saw me looking at it, she turned red and shoved it in a drawer.'

Brown finished his second glass in one go and stood up.

'What should I tell old Mitchell?' the inspector insisted. 'I promised I'd phone him this evening. That was the only thing that stopped him coming here in person. Just imagine, he really wanted to see you, to convince you. He must be about seventy now, the poor man!'

'Can I go up to my room?' Brown asked.

Before replying, the inspector also stood up, approached his companion and, with a gesture so nimble that nobody could have noticed it, felt his pockets to make sure there was no gun in them.

'I'll wait for you in the lobby.'

Brown left his raincoat on an armchair in the lounge. As he passed the desk, Madame Dupré smiled at him.

'When would you like your dinner, Monsieur Brown? My husband has made a nice Dieppe sole for you and your friend.'

'I'll be right down.'

He climbed the stairs at an almost normal pace, only hurrying a little as he reached the top steps. He could be heard opening his door. The inspector, looking around as if admiring the furnishings, murmured:

‘Are you sure there isn’t a second door?’

He frowned, looked up at the ceiling, then glared at the billiard players, who were making a noise.

‘Can’t hear anything any more,’ he said suddenly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I ...’

Madame Dupré now also looked up.

‘I can hear someone walking on the terrace.’

What she had forgotten to tell him was that above the dining room and the lobby there was a terrace, on the same level as the windows of the rooms! The inspector rushed out into the street, saw a thin figure leap four metres, land on his feet and set off at a run down the street.

There was no point giving chase. Standing at the kerb, Mollison filled his pipe, then came back in for a moment and announced:

‘I’ll have dinner later.’

‘What about Monsieur Brown?’

‘I don’t think he’ll be having dinner today.’

At the end of the platform at the main station was a dimly lit office with the words *Chief Inspector, Railway Police* above the door. It was here that Mollison spoke to his French colleague, who took notes as he listened and then telephoned all the police stations and gendarmerie squads in the area.

‘You say he doesn’t have any money on him?’

‘No French money, anyway. I’ve questioned the hotel staff. He had one of the bellboys buy his cigarettes for him, and I know what that means.’

‘It means we’ll have him before midday tomorrow.’

To get back home, Maloin had to cross the centre of town, and he found himself in Rue Saint-Yon, passing from one lighted window display to the next. He had just passed a shop selling pipes when he turned back and went in, without thinking, without debating the question with himself first.

‘I’d like a meerschaum pipe with an amber tip.’

‘Genuine?’

He bought a pipe for two hundred and fifty francs, the same kind they had collected money for to buy Assistant Stationmaster Mordavin when he had been decorated for his thirty-five years of service. He filled it on the spot and lit it.

At least it was a small satisfaction! He walked twenty steps along the street, smoking cautiously, and his gaze came to rest on the butcher's shop where his daughter worked. Whereas the other shops were still crowded, the metal shutters of the butcher's were half closed and the meat had already been put back in the cold room.

Only Henriette was there, her hair in her face, her feet in clogs, bent double washing down the red tiled floor. She had her back to the street. As she was wearing quite a short skirt, her legs could be seen above the knees, and even a strip of flesh above her black stocking.

Maloin crossed the street, still smoking his pipe, and called from the pavement:

'Henriette!'

She turned, her cloth in her hand, and said:

'Oh, it's you! You scared me.'

'You told me it was the assistants who cleaned the shop.'

'Not any more. The boss's wife says they already have too much work.'

He was humiliated, without knowing why, presumably because of that shutter through which they were talking, or else because Henriette hadn't stopped work to listen to him. A voice came from the backroom of the shop, a very high-pitched woman's voice.

'What is it, Henriette?'

'Nothing, madame.'

Maloin should have gone. He realized that.

'That's a nice pipe,' his daughter said, wringing her cloth, which made a strange noise as she did so. 'Did Mother buy it for you?'

Footsteps approached. A woman as broad as she was tall, with the face of a piglet, stopped in the doorway of the backroom.

'Well, now, Henriette ...'

'Yes, madame,' Henriette stammered, just in case, her hair dipping into her bucket.

'I expressly forbade you to speak to men.'

The butcher's wife pretended not to look at Maloin, to be addressing only Henriette.

'This is my father,' the girl said, spreading out her cloth to collect the water.

'I don't care if it's the Pope! You haven't even finished your cooking!'

Maloin again saw only his daughter's back and her exposed legs. People were passing him on the street.

'Henriette!' he called.

She didn't dare turn to him again. The butcher's wife remained where she was, wondering how far the provocation would go.

'Go and get your things.'

'What is it?' the woman said, stepping forwards, her short hands in the pockets of her apron.

Maloin was being stubborn, all the more so as he himself didn't exactly know what he wanted. He could have come through the shutter into the shop, but he retained more prestige by staying outside.

'Henriette, go and finish your cooking right away.'

'Yes, madame.'

'Henriette, I forbid you to go there. Get your things and follow me, right now.'

The scene was very close to being ridiculous, which only made Maloin, who was aware of it, that much more obstinate. To make matter's worse, the butcher's wife and he were pretending to ignore each other, not directly addressing each other.

'You can leave in a week if that's what you want. Or rather you'll leave anyway, I don't want you in my house any more. But you'll see out the week first.'

'Henriette, I'm telling you to get your things.'

Henriette wiped her eyes with the back of her hand – she hadn't let go of the cloth – and looked at the woman, then at her father, who stood out curiously behind the shutter.

'Have you got that?'

'Did you hear me, Henriette? I warn you, I'll fetch the police if I have to.'

'Good!' Maloin retorted. 'Call the police, then.'

He was incapable of saying what he would do. He was in the wrong, and he was furious at being in the wrong.

'For the last time, I'm telling you to come with me.'

Henriette disappeared into the backroom. The butcher's wife, who didn't want to look as if she had accepted defeat, stayed where she was for a few moments more, leaning on the cash desk. Maloin smoked his pipe, forgetting it was a new pipe that had cost him two hundred and fifty francs.

‘I’ve no business leaving my daughter in this house a minute longer,’ he said to himself half-heartedly. ‘When we have five hundred thousand francs and more ...’

From where he was standing, he could almost see the signal box, where there was a suitcase in a cupboard of white wood. The butcher’s wife had disappeared. Voices were raised in the backroom, and Maloin heard a sob.

He paced up and down as he waited, his eyes set firm, his jaws clenched. He needed to feel that he was capable of action. Opposite, there was a stationer’s and, next to it, a shop selling souvenirs of Dieppe.

At last, he turned. Henriette was coming through the shop, in her hat and coat, carrying a little suitcase. She opened the shutter.

‘Why did you do that?’ she asked, walking beside her father.

‘Because!’

‘She wants to complain to the industrial tribunal. If Monsieur Lainé had been there, there’d have been a fight. He’s a brute.’

He smiled disdainfully and, remembering his pipe, took a greedy puff.

‘Let your father do what he likes!’ he said at last, as they passed the Café Suisse.

Through the curtain, he spotted Camélia sitting alone in her corner as usual, over a peppermint cordial.



Unexpected, ridiculous, horrible, but above all stupid: that was the scene that broke out in the little house on the cliff, which Madame Maloin, in her blue apron, had cleaned that day from top to bottom and which was still damp in patches.

A minute before Maloin reached the doorway with Henriette, none of them – the man, the woman, the girl – could have foreseen anything, even though the scene already existed potentially. It was while climbing the steep path that Henriette had said, as if saying something else:

‘What will Mother say?’

What will Mother say? Maloin repeated to himself, turning the key in the lock. Why would she say anything? Why did Henriette need to worry about her mother’s opinion?

He was the first to enter the kitchen, taking up as much space as possible. Since Henriette was still in the darkness of the corridor, Madame Maloin asked:

‘Who’s that with you?’

‘It’s your daughter.’

The storm wasn’t ready to break just yet. Madame Maloin finished laying the table and served the soup before she spoke again.

‘Why did she ask for time off today?’

‘She didn’t ask for time off. I took her away from there.’

‘That was clever!’

This was the last second of peace. From now on the alarm clock and the purring of the stove went unheard, and what hadn’t yet been eaten of dinner

wouldn't be eaten that day.

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean that's all you ever do, you spend months waiting, swallowing everything, then all of a sudden, at the worst possible moment, you do something really stupid.'

'Oh, I did something stupid, did I? According to you, we should have left Henriette in that shop, where passers-by could see half her behind when she washed the floor ...'

'Eat! Let's see how we manage at the end of the month.'

'You think I don't understand?'

'Understand what?'

'What you're hinting at! I don't make enough money to feed my family, that's it, isn't it? I ...'

A first thump of his fist shook the table and the conversation took a turn for the worse. There was now barely even a distant connection between one remark and the next. They jumped from one subject to another, for no apparent reason, simply because they had found a nastier thing to say.

'Tell me I'm a drunk!'

'I'm not saying that, but it's obvious you've been drinking. And when you've been drinking, you're not the same man any more.'

'Hear that, Henriette? Your father's a drunk, while your mother's the saintliest of women!'

Henriette was crying. Madame Maloin was still mechanically putting mouthfuls of bread into her mouth and forgetting to chew them.

'I've been blamed plenty in your family for being just a simple working man. As if your family are any better! They put on airs, yes! But there's nothing to show for it!'

'At least we're better brought up than ...'

What came next was more confused, more unreal.

'... made me suffer for twenty years ...'

'... don't know what's stopping me from ...'

'From what?'

'... from ...'

'Father!'

'Yes, look at him, your father. A pretty sight, isn't he?'

'Maybe you'd find me more to your taste if I put five hundred thousand francs on the table, eh?'

‘You disgust me! Go and sleep it off somewhere else ...’

‘... yes, five hundred thousand francs ... Your whole family would lick my boots then ...’

‘Don’t you dare ...’

‘Dad! Mum!’

There was a raised hand, but it only fell on the table, and soon afterwards the front door slammed shut. Maloin, who had forgotten his can of coffee and his provisions, was hurrying towards the harbour.

‘Eat,’ Madame Maloin was saying to her daughter. ‘He’ll have forgotten all about it by tomorrow. I don’t think you’ll find another job before the holidays.’

At the Newhaven Hotel, Inspector Mollison was sitting by himself at a table laid for two, eating slowly. From the other tables, he was being observed with a mixture of curiosity and respect.

‘He’s from Scotland Yard,’ Monsieur Dupré had whispered as he came and greeted his guests in his chef’s hat at the beginning of the meal.

‘And the other man, Monsieur Brown?’

‘Apparently he’s a famous English burglar.’

At the till, his wife had made up Brown’s account. He owed four hundred and twenty francs, which they would probably never see.

It was still foggy, but it was an ordinary fog, such as is common in the Channel for half the winter. The foghorn was still howling, though. People passing in the street breathed out clouds of steam.

Until nine thirty, Maloin, up there in his cage, noticed nothing abnormal. He had put his meerschaum pipe down on the table and every now and again would throw it a reproachful glance, as if it were to blame for something. Turning to his left, he saw a light in the window of his house, a sight that made him frown.

The night’s intrigue began around the *Francette*. The trawler was finishing taking on coal in order to weigh anchor an hour later with the tide. The deck was lit by a floodlight hanging from the cargo boom. Baskets of coal swung one after the other at the end of a hoist and were tipped into the hold.

It was then that three men dressed like townspeople emerged from the darkness. One of them said something that Maloin didn’t catch, and one of the sailors immediately ran to fetch the captain from a nearby bar.

The conversation took place beneath the floodlight. Maloin recognized one of the men, a police officer. He saw the three of them coming and going on deck, entering the forward quarters, then the wireless operator's cabin, while a uniformed gendarme paced up and down on the quayside, and other footsteps echoed regularly from the other side of the dock.

The police then visited the *Matamore* and the *Va Toujours*, which were leaving to go fishing the same night, and when it was over, the three shadowy figures, instead of going away, wandered on the quays, moving from darkness to light, bending over the boats, peering inside the cafés.

In thirty years, Maloin had witnessed the same spectacle a hundred times. Most often, the point of departure was a telegram from Paris: *Watch railway stations, ports and all border posts.*

He saw Camélia, one of the first to go into the Moulin Rouge. She suspected nothing.

Time passed. Maloin was sleepy. He felt heavy and was furious that he hadn't brought his coffee. Two or three times between ten and midnight, he dozed off without entirely losing consciousness, and once he made a shunting manoeuvre half asleep, so that later, when he saw the wagons coming, he wondered if he had pushed the lever or just dreamed it.

Like every evening, the Dieppe–Paris express, all its windows lit up, was standing at the first platform when the ferry came alongside. The chief inspector from the railway police, who rarely left his office, was standing near the gangway.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened. The passengers were channelled towards passport control, then into customs. But, besides the chief inspector, there was a gendarme next to the train, and that was enough to give this arrival an uncertain feel.

The search had to be meticulous. The first traveller only came out after ten minutes and took his seat in the train, followed by another five, seven, ten, fifteen ...

Then it was the turn of an elderly man in a fur-trimmed coat to leave the customs hall, carrying two suitcases and accompanied by a young girl. As they looked like rich travellers, the waiter from the Pullman car tried to take their luggage, but the old man protested, looking around him in some anxiety.

Even from a distance, he attracted attention, first because of his coat, then because of his white hair, which he wore very long, like an actor, and which

formed a bulge on his astrakhan collar.

When you're used to seeing people disembark, it's easy to guess how each traveller will react. The old man and the young girl were disorientated like all those who, instead of taking the train to Paris, remained in Dieppe. And in winter, visitors not being expected, there was nothing ready to receive them. They looked in vain for a hotel employee or a taxi driver. The old man twice stopped passers-by, but they either didn't understand or were unable to give him any information.

At last a porter took care of them, leading them the length of the train and around the front of the engine, and a few moments later the old man and the girl set off in a taxi.

The train also left. The terminal buildings were closed down. Maloin was thirsty and he promised himself he'd run down and have a hot drink at the Moulin Rouge as soon as everything was quiet again.

He didn't entertain this plan for long. As soon as the excitement had died down on the platform, he was able to perceive other unusual goings-on. For example, Maloin spotted four gendarmes in different places, their stripes glittering in the shadows, plus two figures who must have been gendarmes, too, but whose uniforms were shrouded in darkness.

The chief inspector didn't leave the area. He was a short, thin man, always dressed in a very tight-fitting overcoat, with polished shoes that shone whenever he passed through the circle of light cast by a street lamp.

Keyed up and busy, he went constantly from one place to another, and everywhere he stopped there was someone on duty, a gendarme, a plain-clothes inspector or a constable.

It was a large-scale operation. Maloin was only seeing a small part of it, but he was sure the net covered the whole town.

Was it the man from London they were looking for? He assumed so because he hadn't seen him prowling the area. Any doubts were dispelled when another figure loomed up in the street. There was no mistaking him. He looked all too much like those English detectives who land in Dieppe every now and again, tailing or watching someone, and who sometimes stay for a week or two and stand by the gangway every time a ferry leaves or arrives.

This one headed straight for the Moulin Rouge, which indicated that he was familiar with the town. The whole time he remained there, Maloin kept

his eye on the door, anxiously, and he grew even more nervous when the policeman came out with Camélia.

It wasn't in order to take her to the hotel. Presumably it hadn't been quiet enough inside for them to talk. They walked up and down the street, each time going about a hundred metres, turning by common consent, constantly passing beneath his signal box.

The policeman was calm. He wasn't taking any notes. Occasionally he would nod as if in approval. As for Camélia, she was speaking volubly, either because she was angry or because she was anxious. Once, she even placed both hands on the policeman's arm. He freed himself gently and continued walking.

Even the previous day, Maloin would have thought that the investigation would throw him into a panic. Much to his own surprise, he was as calm as the policeman. From up in his glass cage, he observed Camélia and the Englishman, the gendarmes and sometimes the chief inspector appearing at some strategic point.

The events were easy to reconstruct. The police in London had been informed of a robbery, accompanied perhaps by a murder, and had followed the trail to Dieppe. The chief inspector had been informed and was looking for the man in the raincoat, at the very least to stop him escaping. That was why the trawlers had been searched before they could weigh anchor. The harbour was a restricted area. The railway station was under surveillance, as were the roads.

Seen from the signal box, the spectacle wasn't impressive. These men playing their game looked very small, and there was something comic, if anything, about the chief inspector rushing from one place to another.

What was more disturbing was Camélia, who seemed heavy-hearted. Had she already told the man from the Yard that the two men with the suitcase had sat at a table at the Moulin Rouge and then left together? Had she actually seen them heading for the dock? If so, the detective was bound to look up at the signal box, which was like a beacon in the darkness.

A taxi came out onto the quayside and advanced almost hesitantly. When it drew level with Camélia and the policeman, a hand rapped on the window from inside, the taxi stopped, and the white-haired old man got out, shook the policeman's hand and made to shake Camélia's. All three conversed for a few moments, but already the woman was being relegated to the background. By the time she went back inside the Moulin Rouge, her

companions had lost interest in her, and the policeman finished the process by paying the taxi, which set off back to town.

What the Scotland Yard man and the man with white hair did next was a mystery at first to Maloin. They began by taking up position at the entrance to the terminal. The policeman unhurriedly observed the terrain around him and with a gesture demarcated the space – more or less three metres – that the train for Paris had occupied at the time the ferry arrived.

After that, he headed for the ferry and walked several times up and down the platform, the whole length of the ferry, while the old man followed him resignedly.

Maloin's pupils had narrowed, and his flesh itself seemed to contract in a defensive reflex. He didn't look at the cupboard containing the suitcase. It was as if he was suspicious. But he stubbornly thought things over for about five minutes, and the result of this labour was that he carefully closed the window, stoked the stove and poked it to obtain a roaring fire.

At last, he found the courage to sit down at the table with his legs stretched out, fill his new pipe and look straight ahead. He couldn't see anything of the platform. He could hardly make out the roofs of the nearby houses, and soon the window panes misted up and turned, first greyish, then as white as frosted glass.

The three signalmen all knew that in winter, when their cabin was heated, you had to leave a pane open if you wanted to see outside. One of the three, who was prone to a stiff neck, even preferred to put out the fire in the stove in order to avoid this permanent draught.

Maloin was no more stupid than an English policeman. He knew that, in walking the length of the ferry, the Scotland Yard man was wondering how the suitcase with the banknotes had got through customs.

From that point, he was bound to follow the trail of the two men to the Moulin Rouge, then, when he left the place, he would look around. What would he see? The signal box! If he didn't see it right now, it was because he wasn't standing far enough back, but the night wouldn't go by without

...

Maloin heard voices, quite near. Because of the closed window, it was only a hum. He pushed back his chair in such a way as to put his feet up on the table. Tipping his body back, he blew out denser clouds of smoke.

He was so unconcerned that he had constantly to wipe out the smile that came to his lips. When he heard the iron ladder shake, he pretended to be

dozing off, which came easily to him. A few seconds later, there was a knock at the door and he grunted:

‘Come in!’

It was the English detective. It occurred to Maloin that, if the door remained half open, the windows wouldn’t mist up. He got to his feet, pushed back the door with a kick and glared at his visitor.

‘What are you doing here?’

How could he not smile when the policeman’s gaze came to rest on the windows?

‘I’m from Scotland Yard and I’d like to ask you for some information.’

The policeman wiped the pane with the back of his hand to demarcate his field of vision.

‘Are we in France or England?’ Maloin asked insolently.

The visitor turned in surprise and looked at the stove, the meerschaum pipe, the table covered with old blotting paper, the bottle of purple ink.

‘I’m working in cooperation with the French police,’ he said.

‘What proof do I have of that?’

He was delighted with how well he was playing his part.

‘If you insist, I can call the chief inspector. But it’s hardly worth it. I only have a few questions to ask you. Are these windows always closed?’

‘Yes, always.’

‘How do you manage to see the wagons?’

Maloin thought:

‘Nobody will believe me when I say that right now I feel like laughing!’

It was true, though. With a movement of his chin, he indicated the part of the window the inspector had wiped with his hand.

‘I do what you just did,’ he replied.

‘Did you notice anything unusual these last few nights?’

‘What do you call unusual?’

‘Nothing. Thank you for your help.’

He looked again at the chair, the stove, the table, the ink and even the cupboard, touched the brim of his bowler hat and left. Only then did Maloin feel a tightness in his throat. He would have given a lot for a bowl of hot coffee. He had no more brandy left in his bottle, and this time his colleague hadn’t forgotten to lock his away.

He couldn’t open the windows now, or look outside. The heat was becoming unbearable. Maloin had to take off his jacket and open his shirt

on his chest. A slight noise told him that a fine November rain had started to fall.

Without moving, he was capable of imagining the nocturnal spectacle, the rows of yellow lights, their beams distorted by the rain, the shiny streets, the dark quaysides, the water of the dock covered in bright little circles, the gendarmes lifting the collars of their greatcoats, the little chief inspector coming and going, hopping about, irascible, anxious not to get his polished shoes muddy.

Camélia was in the shelter of the Moulin Rouge, where customers asked her to dance and offered to buy her drinks.

But where was the man from London? Not at the hotel any more, presumably. He had seen the officers deployed around the harbour and the town. It was impossible to go three hundred metres without bumping into a gendarme or an inspector.

They had begun, as always, by visiting the boats, which offer an easy shelter, and then, without fail, the seedier hotels.

It got to the point where Maloin asked himself:

‘If I were him, where would I hide?’

His first thought was the four or five caves in the cliff, but the gendarmes would have thought of them, too.

‘If he did that, he’s done for!’

Endlessly moving from place to place was no better. Unmooring a boat and sailing out to sea was pointless, since all the ports would be alerted.

‘There’s only one way: have a friend in the town and ask him to put you up.’

But the man from London hadn’t spoken to anyone except Camélia, who seemed rather to resent him for it.

‘He’ll be caught!’ Maloin concluded, ill at ease.

Then he thought:

‘It’s to my advantage. That way, he won’t come asking for his money.’

He immediately corrected himself:

‘But he’ll say he threw the suitcase in the water near the signal box.’

He was stifling. In spite of everything, he went and took a breath of fresh air and for a moment saw the dock surrounded by lights, and the brightly coloured windows of the Moulin Rouge. Glancing in the direction of the cliff, he thought with annoyance that, when he got home, it would be to confront grim faces, even reproaches or a new scene.

He might get away with going straight up to his room and going to bed, because he needed sleep. He dozed off again and didn't open his eyes until day was breaking. It was all right now to open a window and look around.

Before anything else, he looked for the gendarmes and only saw two of them on guard duty, one on each quayside. But people were getting out of a car, near the fish market. A group was forming, and Maloin recognized the harbourmaster and the maritime chief inspector, who were listening to the explanations of the chief inspector from the railway police. The man from the Yard was with them. As for the old man, he had presumably gone to bed.

A few minutes later, harbour dinghies moved away from the quay, each with three men in them, and Maloin didn't need to see more to understand. This was a periodic spectacle. Every time someone drowned and they couldn't find the body, dinghies were sent out to search, equipped with grappling hooks and harrows.

The authorities had remained on the quayside, where the fine rain made the shoulders of their coats glisten, and discussed things for a few minutes more, then separated.

It was the most unpleasant weather, damp and cold, with a sky that slowly descended on you. The wagons were dripping wet. Monsieur Babu, the ship owner, pushed his car out of the garage and poured hot water in the radiator, and even then had to spend a quarter of an hour turning the crank handle before he could get the engine to start.

'Did someone drown last night?' Maloin's colleague asked, looking at the boats.

'No, nothing like that.' He closed the stove. 'How hot it is!'

During all this time, the man from London was somewhere, perhaps without heat, perhaps without money to buy food, perhaps ...

Madame Maloin watched her husband come in and noticed how evasive he looked.

She assumed it was because of the previous day's scene and she made the first move.

'I let Henriette sleep,' she murmured, serving the coffee. 'She might as well take advantage. She won't be without a job for long.'



‘Olga! Take Mademoiselle Mitchell her breakfast right away!’

When the maid passed with the tray, Madame Dupré stopped her with a gesture and conducted a rapid inspection.

‘Add two slices of toast and a pat of butter.’

It was nine thirty by the clock above the mahogany bar. But time had become meaningless. The Newhaven Hotel was no longer living its normal life.

Old Mitchell, who had come back at five in the morning, was already up. He could be heard coming and going in the bathroom: according to the floor valet, he was doing gymnastics.

As for Inspector Mollison, he had spent all night outside. Madame Dupré had been at the desk when he got back, as calm as any ordinary man.

‘Let me sleep until ten. If anyone phones me or asks to speak to me, you’re not to disturb me under any pretext. At ten, bring me up my breakfast.’

‘That only gives you two hours’ sleep.’

‘That’s enough!’

He was really pleasant, really straightforward, and yet Madame Dupré didn’t dare ask him any questions. Arriving at eight thirty, the bellboy had announced that there were gendarmes and police everywhere. He was exaggerating a little, but not much, and the shopkeepers opening their shutters had all made the same remark.

It rained all day. The sea, a treacherous green, was streaked with white crests. By nine fifteen, calls were already coming in for the inspector, and

Madame Dupré remained inflexible.

‘No, monsieur. Monsieur Mollison was categorical. If you’d like to ring back after ten ...’

Germain, starting his shift, murmured:

‘I wonder if they’ll catch him.’

Madame Dupré was quite surprised that she hadn’t thought about Brown until now. It was doubtless the size of the police deployment that impressed her, perhaps also Inspector Mollison’s calm and authority.

‘Where can he have hidden himself?’ Germain continued, putting on the white jacket he wore outside meal times. ‘Would *you* have taken him for a criminal, Madame Dupré? He had a sad way of drinking his whisky and asking me for another, without saying anything, just with a look.’

‘Shhh! Monsieur Mitchell is coming down.’

Maloin, who was breathing noisily, the way you do when you’ve drunk too much – even though he hadn’t had a drop – turned on his left side and became aware that he was in his bed and that he had been asleep for about an hour. Just then, the street door opened and closed. He had to start thinking, but he felt vaguely that if he did he would never finish, and that it would be unpleasant, and he managed to fall asleep again.

His wife was cleaning the kitchen stove with a mixture of wax, turpentine, graphite and lampblack. It was Henriette who had just gone out, her coat pocket weighed down with a large key. She had put on her clogs and knotted a handkerchief around her hair.

‘Go and look for some velvet crabs for lunch,’ her mother had said to her.

For that you had to follow the cliff path rather than descending the steep path that led to the dock. The terrain was covered in short grass, the same washed-out green as the waves. Henriette noticed that a gendarme was standing just at the corner of the cliff and the harbour, but it didn’t worry her, and she set off along the rutted track that led down to the sea.

The tide was low. Over an area of two hundred metres, the pebbles were covered with seaweed and marine plants through which you had to trudge – avoiding slipping – to search for velvet crabs with a hook. Henriette had been fishing for crabs in the same spot since the age of six. The drizzle plastered her hair over her temples. She breathed in deeply, smelling again the strong odour of kelp, and headed for the hut that her father had built

with old materials at the foot of the cliff, using the cliff itself as a supporting wall.

She could still see the figure of the gendarme above her. Having nothing else to do, he was watching her.

‘Father forgot to close the door,’ she thought, inserting the key into the lock and realizing she didn’t need to turn it.

The hut contained a boat that Maloin used for fishing, some lobster pots, some fishing lines, as well as all kinds of things he gathered from the coast after heavy storms: empty barrels, pieces of cork, biscuit cases, wooden flotsam.

There wasn’t much light. Henriette knew that the baskets were on the left and she took two steps forwards, then stopped, startled to hear a creak. She thought at first it was a big rat, but then there was a second creak that couldn’t have been made by a rat. She made out the milky patch of a face in the semi-darkness.

Why didn’t she cry out? Maybe she was thinking of the gendarme on guard on the cliff. Forgetting to take the hook and the crab basket, she beat a retreat, closed the door mechanically and put the key back in her pocket.

Without thinking, she ran towards her house, and the closer she got, the more her fear increased, which made it all the more surprising to her that she had behaved with such composure. She rapped at the door and gasped as soon as her mother opened:

‘There’s a man in the hut!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘And I saw a gendarme on the cliff. They must be looking for someone.’

Up there, in his little room, Maloin, hearing the murmur of the two women, opened an eye. He saw the wallpaper with its silvery stripes that he had put up to replace the old, flowery one because the merchant had told him it was more modern. But he couldn’t get used to it, any more than to the piece of silk adorned with four wooden tassels that served as a lampshade.

To hear what they were saying, all he had to do was open the other eye, raise his head and listen carefully. Beside him, there was a hollow in the bed where his wife had slept during the night, and when he moved his head, he brushed against a pillow that smelled different from his.

He wondered if he was going to listen or to sleep. He chose to sleep, but it was a sleep that didn’t stop him from being aware that he was asleep, or

of knowing that when he woke he would have to think of tiresome things.

‘We’ll be serving you in the dining room, Monsieur Mitchell. Germain! Serve Monsieur Mitchell his breakfast ... You have bacon and eggs, don’t you?’

He was a curious old man, very slight and incredibly nervous. What was most striking about him was his pink, childlike complexion, his guileless face beneath his white hair.

‘Hasn’t he been arrested yet?’ he asked with some difficulty, knowing only a few words of French and pronouncing them badly.

So badly that Germain didn’t understand, and Madame Dupré had to translate:

‘Monsieur Mitchell is asking if the thief has been arrested yet. I don’t know, Monsieur Mitchell. The inspector’s in bed and gave orders not to be woken before ten.’

She glanced at the clock. It was nine fifty. Just then, the telephone rang, within reach of her hand.

‘Hello? ... Yes, this is the Newhaven Hotel ... No, monsieur ... If you’d liked to phone back in ten minutes ... I assure you it’s impossible ... What’s that you say? ... I’m sorry, captain, but I really don’t have the right ...’

Her husband had passed his head, clad in a white chef’s hat, through the hatch of the pantry.

‘It’s the harbourmaster,’ she said, waving her hands excitedly. ‘They’ve just fished something out.’

Behind the windows of the dining room, she could see Mitchell eating slowly.

‘Germain! It’s three minutes to ten. Just time to prepare the tray ...’

Germain understood. Three minutes later, he was knocking at the door of Room 6. For a quarter of an hour, there was the sound of footsteps, the sound of a tap, and at last the door opened and Inspector Mollison walked downstairs, freshly shaved, his suit brushed, his hair reeking of eau de Cologne.

‘The harbourmaster phoned. Apparently, they’ve found a body ...’

Mitchell, abandoning his meal, came running. The inspector held out his right hand to him and at the same time picked up the receiver in his left.

‘Hello? The harbourmaster’s office, please.’

As he phoned, he threw out the odd English word to his companion. Germain, who was near the bar, remained on the alert, Monsieur Dupré was motionless behind the hatch, and Madame Dupré gave a weak smile to apologize for being there.

The call over, the inspector said something else to Mitchell in English, then said to Germain:

‘My overcoat, please.’

‘I’m sorry, Monsieur Mollison. Excuse my rudeness.’

Madame Dupré was pink with embarrassment.

‘Do you mind my asking if it’s ... if it’s Monsieur Brown they found?’

He looked at her in surprise.

‘Why Monsieur Brown?’

‘I thought ... I don’t know ... It seemed to me ...’

‘It’s the body they found! The body of the man your Monsieur Brown killed.’

She blushed even more, because he had said ‘your Monsieur Brown’, and it was almost an accusation. She wondered if her husband had noticed the implication, but he hadn’t been paying attention.

‘Bring Monsieur Mitchell’s coat, Germain!’

The two men set off, leaving a kind of chill in the hotel. At first nobody spoke. Germain arranged his glasses and finally said as he looked at his counter:

‘Do you think it’s possible, Madame Dupré?’

Madame Dupré herself was looking at the armchair where Monsieur Brown had been in the habit of sitting, sometimes spending more than an hour there, staring into space. It was some two metres from her. From time to time, they would exchange a few words. She had even asked him if he was married, and he had silently shown her his wedding ring.

Hadn’t she gone so far as to imagine that the reason for his sadness lay perhaps in his wife’s impropriety or wickedness?

‘Start laying the tables, Germain. We’ll need five settings for Monsieur Henry and two for the people from Paris.’

They were whispering in the Maloins’ kitchen. The house was almost new, cleverly laid out and easy to maintain, with a tiled yard, a wash house and a scullery. The wooden floors were polished, and the walls of the stairwell painted in oil. But nobody had thought about the thinness of the walls. You

could hear everything that was being said in the next room. Whenever Maloin got dressed, for example, in the bedroom on the first floor, there was a noise like thunder for a quarter of an hour.

‘Are you sure you locked the door behind you?’

‘I did it without thinking. I went out and turned the key.’

‘I’m wondering if we should tell your father. I don’t know what’s the matter with him these days. Did you see the pipe he bought without telling us? He hardly slept last night or the night before.’

‘We could tell the gendarme and give him the key.’

They were both thinking about it, but the thought made them bow their heads and knotted their stomachs, especially Henriette, who was imagining now that she had glimpsed the eyes of a hunted animal in the semi-darkness.

‘If only we knew what he’s done ...’

‘Maybe there’s something in this morning’s newspaper.’

The paper was in the mailbox, Maloin being the only one to read it when he got up. Henriette looked at the headlines, then turned the pages, but didn’t find anything that might have a connection with the man hiding in the hut.

‘What if he was there to steal your father’s equipment?’

That scared them: if Maloin’s lines disappeared, he would be extremely angry.

He was sleeping so lightly up there that he was still aware that they were whispering, even though he buried his head in the pillow as much as possible and even pretended to snore, as if he could trick sleep to come. A foghorn told him it was eleven. Normally, he still had another two hours’ sleep ahead of him. He would have plenty of time to think about this business.

Miss Mitchell came down into the lobby of the Newhaven Hotel, and Madame Dupré looked at her with some curiosity. The previous night, it had been the night porter who had received the guests. You always form an idea of people before you meet them, and Madame Dupré had imagined Eva Mitchell as a slim, determined, sporty-looking young woman.

In fact, she looked like a little girl or, better still, a doll, with her big blue eyes, her tiny nose and her flimsy clothes. She knew a few words of French, although not much more than her father, and her accent was endearing.

‘Do you have any news?’ she asked.

‘News of what, mademoiselle?’

‘Our money.’

‘No! All I know is that they fished out – I beg your pardon – a body from the dock. Germain has just told me that it had been caught for two days on a pile in the south jetty ...’

‘The south jetty ...’ she repeated, as if studying French.

She hadn’t understood. Madame Dupré was speaking too fast. She looked at the bar, then the dining room, then the lounge, searching perhaps for somewhere to sit, but in the end she made for the door.

Although the rain was still falling, she crossed the central reservation and from there could be seen walking along the seafront, all by herself. From a distance, she seemed all the more insubstantial, all the more like a child.

Inspector Mollison and Mr Mitchell emerged from a shed near the dock. Mollison said to the harbourmaster:

‘That’s Teddy all right. I’ll have them send you his file.’

‘Do you think he was murdered?’

‘I don’t think. I’m sure. It was bound to happen one of these days. If you knew Brown, you’d understand. Teddy was his bad angel. Teddy would make him do one thing or another, yet somehow Brown never ended up reaping the benefit ...’

There were handshakes. Mitchell was agitated. As he strode along the quayside with Mollison, he bombarded him with questions.

‘But you did tell the fellow what I said?’

‘I repeated your message word for word. But I’m convinced Teddy never even made it as far as the hotel.’

‘You told me that if Brown saw he’d been found out, he’d give up the money just to have a quiet life.’

Mollison didn’t reply. From a distance, he recognized the gendarmes and the plain-clothes policemen. The locals also recognized them and talked about them in all the shops, the newspapers not having mentioned a murder or any major theft.

‘Go and join your daughter, Mr Mitchell.’

‘Did you know the first time he performed as a contortionist, it was in my theatre? Before that, he was just a clown in a travelling circus.’

‘Yes, I did. Go and find Miss Eva. She must be getting bored, all alone in that hotel.’

Maloin was exhausted from trying to sleep. He had turned over twenty times and now he had a crick in his neck. However much he tried to muddy his thoughts, they all connected up again as soon as his will weakened for a moment.

‘Your father’s getting up,’ Madame Maloin announced, spreading the tablecloth on the table.

‘Shall I tell him?’

‘Let’s see what kind of mood he’s in first. I’ll give you a sign.’

Usually, Maloin came down without dressing, just putting a pair of trousers and a jacket on over his nightshirt, his feet in felt slippers. But for a long time they heard him coming and going, and when he opened the kitchen door he was dressed, as he had been the day before, in his Sunday best.

‘What was all that mysterious chatter about this morning?’ he griped, looking around him suspiciously.

Taking the lid off the cooking pot, he protested:

‘Cabbage again?’

‘I wanted to make velvet crab,’ his wife blurted out.

‘And?’

On the corner of the table, he saw the big black key and also the headscarf Henriette only ever put on to go to the coast.

‘The tide was low, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, Dad.’

Madame Maloin signalled to her daughter to speak.

‘I’ll explain ... The last time you were there, you probably forgot to lock the hut.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I swear to you, the door wasn’t locked.’

Frowning, he waited with his back to the stove and his hands on his pipe, which he had started to fill.

‘I’d already seen a gendarme on the cliff. I had to go and fetch the hook and the basket ...’

Right now, his wife and daughter seemed to him like enemies.

‘Well? Have you lost your tongue?’

‘I saw a man in the hut!’ Henriette said quickly. ‘He was hiding behind the boat ...’

He walked up to her as if he was going to hit her.

‘What did he say to you? Tell me what he said!’

‘Louis!’ Madame Maloin moaned.

‘Tell me, damn it!’

‘He didn’t say anything. I ran away.’

He was breathing heavily, his eyes as hard as when he sensed a fight brewing in a bar.

‘Did you tell the gendarme?’

‘No,’ she said, ready to burst into tears.

He saw the key again and suddenly exploded:

‘So you locked him in?’

She didn’t dare say any more. She nodded, her arms raised to ward off blows.

Maloin was stifling. He needed to do something, anything, something violent to calm his nerves, and his pipe was the first victim: with all his might he threw it to the ground, where it smashed like an egg.

‘Damn it! You locked him in the hut?’

The pipe wasn’t enough, and Madame Maloin, who was following the direction of his threatening glare, rushed to save the soup tureen.

‘Damn it!’ he repeated.

Anything could have happened! But that! The man from London locked in his hut!

‘What are you going to do, Louis?’

He had taken the key and was putting it in his pocket.

‘You ask me what I’m going to do?’

He had no idea. But to impress them, he sneered.

‘Listen, both of you, the first thing you’re going to do is keep your mouths shut, got that? I don’t want to be asked any questions! And now, go back to your women’s business!’

He strode heavily along the corridor, grabbed his cap from the coat stand and opened the door. The rain was beginning to fall more heavily now. After a few steps his cheeks were streaming, his hands wet. He hadn’t thought of taking his old wooden pipe, which meant he couldn’t smoke.

He only had to go fifty metres to see the gendarme stationed at the corner of the cliff, with his back to the town, as motionless as a sentry. Further on

was the green sea, streaked with white. And on the far horizon the darker patch discernible in the sky was the smoke from the Newhaven ferry.



‘Hello!’ Maloin said, both hands in his pockets, stopping at the edge of the cliff.

He could allow himself to be casual. After all, a railway employee is every bit as good as a gendarme, and this gendarme understood that. He looked at Maloin’s cap and, as if greeting a friend, replied:

‘Hello!’

‘Is there something wrong around here?’

Maloin pretended to look at the sea, but he squinted in the direction of his hut, which was just below him, with its roof half of corrugated iron, half of tarred cardboard.

‘We’re looking for an Englishman,’ the gendarme sighed, turning towards the town, where, if you had good eyesight, you could see the clock in the ferry terminal.

‘Oh, an Englishman!’

The gendarme was thinking only of being relieved, which sickened Maloin. He would have liked to talk for a long time, to savour this conversation, telling himself that the man hiding below them would hear the murmur of their voices. The sea was rising. By five, it would reach the cliff and if it was high enough the water would lap against the door of the shed.

‘Do you live around here?’ the gendarme asked out of politeness.

Maloin pointed to the three houses on the cliff, and the gendarme sighed fervently:

‘That can’t be fun!’

‘Tell me, what if he’s armed, this Englishman of yours?’

‘Apparently he isn’t.’

Maloin didn’t want to go, although it wasn’t very natural to stand there in the rain, looking at the sea. But it was the rain that calmed him, along with the presence of the gendarme, the sadness of the town’s wet roofs, the white foam caps on the green sea. It was only right that the scene should be bleak. He listened to the noise of the rain dripping on the corrugated iron roof of the hut and knew that threads of liquid were seeping inside.

‘Are you sure he hasn’t left town?’ he asked, as indifferently as if asking for a light.

‘I only know what I’ve been told. The inspector from Scotland Yard says the man doesn’t have any money in his pocket, any gun, any knife.’

Which led Maloin to think his clown had nothing to eat. It was dizzying to be where he was and let his mind slowly work. If the man heard their voices, wouldn’t he assume he was surrounded? Wasn’t he shaking right now, with both fear and cold? And what about when Henriette had gone in?

With his foot, Maloin pushed a clump of earth to the edge of the cliff and sent it rolling down onto the corrugated iron.

‘Is that your shed?’ the gendarme asked. ‘Do you have a boat?’

‘I only have a flat-bottomed boat, but one of these days I’m going to get a boat with a motor.’

‘What age do you get a pension on the railways?’

‘Fifty-five.’

The man was still below them, with nothing to eat! Maloin pushed another clump of earth, like a little boy kicking a stone on his way back from school. But there had been a wearier look in his eyes since thinking – at the moment the gendarme mentioned the pension:

‘If I don’t open the door, he’ll be dead in a few days!’

And that conjured up new images, for example Maloin dragging a thin stiff body to the sea at night, when the tide was high.

‘I have to go and eat!’ he said.

His hands buried deep in his pockets, he headed for his house. It was a terrible thing to indulge all these thoughts. At night, the gendarmes would presumably patrol with torches, and if the man was unfortunate enough to move ...

He found everyone at the table, including Ernest, who was back from school. He ate without saying anything, looking around at his family.

‘Would you like to come out with me?’ he suddenly asked Henriette.

She turned to her mother, who nodded.

‘Good idea! Go for a walk, the two of you.’

‘What about me?’ Ernest moaned.

‘You stay here.’

Maloin went up to his room, combed his hair and brushed his suit, then, thinking he should take a little money, opened the old biscuit tin that was in the mirrored wardrobe. The tin contained a thousand-franc note and one of five hundred, and he put them furtively into his pocket.

‘Are you ready, Henriette?’

‘In five minutes!’

He passed her door and was tempted to open it. The water was lapping in the dock. He only waited a brief moment and hastened to say with a laugh:

‘Make yourself beautiful!’

The man must be hungry, and with the persistent rain, ten leaks at least must have formed on the roof of the hut, letting in lots of icy water.

‘Get out of here for a minute, Ernest.’

‘Why?’

He pushed the boy into the corridor and held his hands over the fire as he did when he had just washed.

‘I’ve been thinking about what Henriette said this morning,’ he said to his wife. ‘You mustn’t tell anyone. Got that?’

‘What if he leaves with your boat?’

He hadn’t thought of that. Exasperated, he sighed:

‘Too bad!’

Henriette had put on powder and rouge, slightly too much rouge, particularly as she was wearing a green silk dress. Whenever she dressed like this, it was noticeable that she was plumper than everyone thought.

‘Where are we going?’

‘We’ll see.’

They walked in silence as far as the steep path, and for no particular reason Maloin had the same feeling he always had on public holidays or at weddings, the feeling of being outside everyday life.

‘Did your boss flirt with you?’

‘Not likely!’

He was peering at her with his little eyes, both pleased and anxious.

‘I advised your mother not to say anything about the hut. Of course, you won’t talk about it either.’

A trawler was weighing anchor, and the crew, all of them up on deck, looked at Henriette and smiled. She wasn’t walking the way she usually did either, but the way she did on Sundays, with lighter, more cautious steps. She stepped over the puddles, her face lighting up with an inner joy.

‘Are we going to the Café Suisse?’

Maloin didn’t reply immediately. He was gazing up at his signal box, on the other side of the dock, and trembling at the thought that he was rich. It was so incredible, so far-fetched! When he was alone, he found it hard to grasp everything this money represented, but now, out strolling with his daughter, he was discovering new prospects.

‘Would you be pleased not to go into service any more?’

‘That’s impossible,’ she replied, with no inkling of what might be behind these words.

‘What if it was possible? What if you dressed better than the Lainé girl?’

‘She can spend as much as she likes, she dresses like a tramp!’

Maloin glimpsed the grey silhouette of his colleague up in the signal box. The day was grey, too. The street lamps hadn’t come on yet, which gave the scene a glum, seedy feel. The day-shift signalman must have seen him, too, and must be envying him for strolling with his daughter in her Sunday best.

Two gendarmes were on duty on the corner of the quayside, another outside the ferry terminal. Darkness was falling, and people were walking more quickly, hugging the houses when cars passed to avoid being splashed.

The lights came on in the Café Suisse. The phonograph was playing. Camélia was already in her corner and, since Maloin was with his daughter, she pretended not to recognize him but looked Henriette up and down.

‘You can have a nice drink, a liqueur. Waiter! A liqueur and a good calvados.’

‘Bénédictine?’

Henriette gave a hesitant pout and shook her head.

‘Another calvados, with a sugar cube.’

It was she who returned to the thing that concerned them.

‘I wonder if he has anything to eat. Do we know if he’s young?’

Neither young, nor old! He was ageless. He was a sad, worried creature.

‘A hard-luck case!’ Maloin told himself, seeing again the boat moving slowly, the grappling hook sinking into the water in search of the suitcase.

‘Did your pipe cost a lot, Father?’

‘Why?’

‘Because if it wasn’t too expensive, I’d buy you another one.’

Afraid she would find out the pipe had cost two hundred and fifty francs, he changed the subject.

‘Didn’t your mother ask you to get her some blue wool?’

‘Yes. She wants me to make a pullover for Ernest.’

What could a fur like Camélia’s cost? Maloin remembered that once when he had kissed her, he had brushed against the warm, scented fur. He didn’t know anything about it. He asked Henriette, who gave Camélia a haughty glance.

‘I bet it’s fake! And the woman’s a tart. I know her. She used to come into the shop in the morning, in a dirty dressing gown and slippers.’

‘If it’s fake, how much does it cost?’

‘Maybe three hundred francs.’

He drank a second calvados and paid the waiter with the five-hundred-franc note.

‘Come on.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘You’ll see!’

Some days, alcohol has no effect on you, or gives you a headache, and other times it fills your chest with a warm sense of optimism. That was the case now. Maloin’s eyes were shiny, and on the way out he gave Camélia a friendly little sign.

Night had fallen. All the shop windows were lit up. Umbrellas collided in the streets. Maloin noticed a young woman wearing a blue raincoat and decided on the spur of the moment to buy the same kind for his daughter. Nonchalantly, with a sly smile, he pushed her into the lobby of the Nouvelles Galeries, then from department to department, until they came to the waterproof clothes. There, he immediately said to the assistant:

‘Show us the blue raincoats.’

‘Linen or silk?’

While his daughter tried on coats, he smiled defiantly, thinking about the inspector from Scotland Yard. It wasn’t only him he was defying, but also

that morning's bumbling gendarme, and the chief inspector from the railway police, running around desperately in the rain.

'How much is it?' he asked.

'A hundred and seventy-five francs. We have a matching beret.'

He bought the beret, which cost twenty francs, and glanced around him to make sure there was nothing else to buy.

'Will you be wearing it straight away, mademoiselle?'

Of course she would. She gave her address so that they could send on her own coat. Back in the street, it felt more than ever like a celebration to Maloin and his daughter. None of the passers-by who saw their excited smiles suspected a thing. Maloin told himself that he could spend the whole of the five-hundred-franc note.

'Are your shoes still good?'

'They don't let in water, but they don't go with the blue.'

They bought shoes. It was a joy to approach the cash desk and say, showing off the fact that money was no object:

'How much are they?'

Madame Maloin would have run around town for two weeks before choosing the same pair of shoes! By now, the gendarme had surely changed. Maybe that particular surveillance had been called off: they couldn't keep watching the coast endlessly just because a man was on the run. The water was pattering on the corrugated iron.

'Are you happy?'

'Oh, yes! But what's Mother going to say?'

He screwed up his eyes as much as he could and didn't reply. A little further on, he stopped outside a glove shop.

'Go in!'

Henriette was starting to look with a touch of anxiety at her father's flushed face.

'Would you prefer fur-lined or wool-lined?'

'Whatever's best!'

The funniest thing was that he could have wept with joy and irritation. He was floating in a new world. Normally, he should have been at home, busy doing odd jobs, as he did almost every afternoon, or else playing dominoes in a bar.

'Get a pair for your mother. She'll be pleased.'

'I don't know her size.'

‘If they don’t fit, mademoiselle,’ the assistant hastened to say, ‘we can change them.’

Everyone was friendly. When they bought stockings in the next shop, Henriette was addressed as Madame, and Maloin turned his head away to hide his smile.

What could the man hiding out in the hut be hoping for? He didn’t have any money on him. The police had his description.

Suddenly Maloin lost interest in his daughter’s purchases. If the murderer had chosen the hut, wasn’t it because he was planning to break in to Maloin’s house under cover of darkness? He knew where Maloin lived. He couldn’t possibly suspect that the suitcase was still in the signal box. He knew that Maloin was away from home every night.

You read stories like this in the newspapers: an ex-convict or a man on the run, someone who has nothing to lose, breaks into an isolated house, a farm, a villa, kills women and old people with an axe or an iron bar, grabs the money, raids the larder and drinks the wine straight from the smashed necks of the bottles.

‘How much are they?’ he asked half-heartedly.

Noticing the change in him, Henriette asked him in a low voice:

‘Do you think that’s too much?’

‘No, no!’

‘Are you angry?’

‘Absolutely not!’

He didn’t like Ernest, because everyone said he looked like his uncle, and his mother always defended him against her husband. All the same, he bought him a new satchel and a box of watercolours. Henriette carried the packages. The rain had eased off, but the drops still pattered on the tissue paper.

What else could he buy? Now that he had change from the thousand-franc note, he had no more reason to stop off anywhere. And he had given up on the idea of buying something for himself.

‘You should buy yourself a new cap, Father!’

Of course! A railwayman’s cap! Why not a uniform?

‘Let’s go in here a moment!’

It was a bistro. At the counter, he knocked back an aperitif, in the hope of getting his good mood back. He wasn’t even allowed to stay at home tonight and guard his house!

‘What are you drinking?’

‘Nothing. I’m not thirsty any more.’

‘Give her a little drink anyway,’ he said to the barman.

If she didn’t drink, it looked like a reproach.

‘It won’t do you any harm, come on! Where is there a shop selling furs?’

‘Opposite the post office.’

He was becoming heavier, more stubborn, more obsessive. At the furrier’s, his manner was quite unpleasant.

‘How much is a fox?’

‘A genuine one? They start at five hundred francs.’

‘Show me some at that price.’

His daughter pulled him by the sleeve.

‘You shouldn’t. Mother will be angry. Imitation fox is just as good.’

‘Leave me alone.’

She, too, was losing her lightheadedness, but she regained it when she had the fur around her neck. It was a red fox, which didn’t match the raincoat.

‘Will you be wearing it now?’

Of course she would! They plunged back into the streets with their packages.

‘Isn’t it time to go home?’ Henriette said anxiously.

She crossed to the other side of the street when they passed the butcher’s shop, but the shutter was closed, and the shop was empty. At the corner of the street, a woman was asking someone for information. Maloin noticed her, because she was speaking English, and peered at her. She was wearing a black tailored suit that was too thin for the season. She had irregular features, with red hair escaping from her hat and a gold chain with a medallion around her thin neck.

‘Buy the papers,’ he said to his daughter.

He avoided looking at the signal box. As they were walking round the corner of Café Suisse to get to the quayside, Henriette bumped into Camélia, who was standing in the shadows with the English policeman.

Maloin hurried on. They couldn’t say anything to him! He hadn’t done anything wrong! Frowning, he was looking for a way to do something about the hut. Once he had done that, he would just have to wait for a few weeks or months then ask to retire.

He would go somewhere in France, somewhere that was still Normandy, south of the Seine, for example, near Caen. He would buy a boat with a sail and a motor and go fishing for his own pleasure.

‘I still can’t help wondering what Mother will say.’

Henriette’s anxiety grew as they got nearer the house. Maloin just had time to change his clothes, have dinner and go to work.

Wouldn’t the man try to leave his shelter during the night? There were tools behind the boat. If he cut up the planks ...

It would be frightening not to know where he was any more! More frightening even than knowing he was in the hut! Had he hesitated to kill the other Englishman? No, he had killed him just like that, the way you don’t imagine one man can kill another man when you’ve never witnessed a murder, a way that didn’t make much of an impression.

If he hadn’t eaten since the previous day, he would be in a dejected state, given that he had already been unwell before.

All the same, hiding in the darkness of the hut, he had an advantage ...

Wouldn’t it be best to talk to him through the door, softly so as not to alert anybody, and offer him some of the money?

‘There’s someone in the house,’ Henriette remarked as they approached it.

‘How do you know?’

‘The hall light is on.’

When they didn’t have a visitor, they left the light off in the hall.

‘Do you have the key?’

She opened the door. They heard voices. Henriette wondered if she wouldn’t do better to leave her new clothes and her packages in the corridor, but her father pushed her towards the kitchen.

It was his brother-in-law, who was in there with his wife.

‘I didn’t know you were meant to be coming,’ Maloin said without looking them in the face.

Simultaneously, his own wife cried out:

‘What is all this? Was it your father who ...’

She touched the raincoat, the hat and the gloves and looked at her husband with a sense of rising dread.

‘Don’t I get anything?’ Ernest moaned, unwrapping a package containing stockings.

Maloin's sister-in-law thought the raincoat too showy. His brother-in-law said:

'I was just telling your wife that you were wrong to take Henriette away from a safe job with shopkeepers who have money.'

There were too many people in the kitchen, and the unwrapped packages added to the chaos. Everyone was talking at once. Henriette showed off her shoes. Something was burning on the stove.

'It's so hard to find a good position these days.'

Maloin had his head down, like a disgruntled bull. He watched them all bustling about. There was noise all around him, and he was sure he would never manage to bring order into all this, never get out of such a complicated situation.

'Damn it all!' he sighed, discouraged, opening the door.

And he went up to his room to change his clothes, wiping his eyes before switching on the light.



A glass partition separated the lobby from the dining room, and Madame Dupré could direct the service from where she sat, because there was one hatch communicating with the dining room and another with the pantry.

There weren't many people tonight. At dinner time, a couple had arrived and asked the price of a meal – a newly married couple of slender means who were going to London for their honeymoon. They had been put in the left-hand corner, where they were now eating, intimidated by the silverware and by Germain's uniform.

Apart from a travelling salesman who was in Dieppe for ten days or so, the only other table in use was the one occupied by the English. Old Mitchell and his daughter were sitting on one side, Inspector Mollison on the other.

Everyone was dining in silence, and Madame Dupré knew they would keep quiet until the end. It was always like this when there weren't at least five tables laid, and the embarrassment was so tangible that whenever anyone appeared with the intention of having dinner, they would stop in the doorway and beat a hasty retreat. Because of the emptiness, service was faster than usual, and Germain ended up waiting for the plates like a bird of prey.

The cheeses had just been passed round when the front door slammed open. Then they heard hesitant steps and saw a young woman looking shyly around her.

'Are you here for a room?' Madame Dupré asked from a distance.

The newcomer replied in English, and Madame Dupré pressed the bell to summon Germain, who spoke the language a little.

From the dining room, Mollison had seen the young woman and had risen from his chair to find out the reason for her state.

‘Brown’s wife,’ he murmured, heading for the lobby. ‘I wonder what she’s doing here.’

‘I know!’

Eva Mitchell stood up in her turn, put her napkin down on the table, and said, with a smile in which there was an element of defiance aimed at Mollison:

‘I telegraphed her to come.’

She didn’t waste a minute, didn’t hesitate for an instant, as if it had all been planned. No sooner was she in the lobby than she said in English:

‘Mrs Brown, I assume? Will you come with me into the lounge? I’m Miss Mitchell.’

Mrs Brown was about twenty-eight. She had been very pretty once, with a fragile prettiness that hadn’t completely disappeared but had faded. When she had married Brown, she was a showgirl in a third-class dance troupe, which didn’t stop her being as meek and unassuming as she was now, with the same smile by which she seemed to be apologizing for existing.

Eva Mitchell had sat down on the arm of an armchair, crossed her legs and lit a cigarette.

‘Have you heard from your husband?’

‘No. He should be in Rotterdam. When I got your telegram, I thought he’d had an accident.’

‘What do you think Mr Brown’s profession is?’

‘He’s a travelling salesman for a French manufacturer of theatrical make-up and wigs.’

‘If that’s what he told you, he lied. He’s a burglar, and the gentleman who’s sitting over there with my father is an inspector from Scotland Yard given the task of arresting him.’

She presented this so matter-of-factly that Mrs Brown simply stood motionless, wide-eyed, without a squeak of protest.

‘My father, whom you can see over there, is Harold Mitchell, the owner of the Palladium.’

Mrs Brown made as if to bow, even more dazzled by this name than she was frightened by the girl’s accusation.

‘Your husband stole more than five thousand pounds from him.’

Mollison was watching them through two layers of glass: Miss Mitchell on the arm of the armchair, Mrs Brown standing, her hands joined on the clasp of her handbag, already prepared to do whatever the girl ordered her to do.

‘If you want proof of what I’m saying, I can call the inspector over.’

The woman shook her head, out of politeness.

It was the hour when Maloin entered his glass cage and said his ritual:

‘Hello!’

‘Hello, mate,’ his colleague said. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Why should anything be the matter?’

He put his can of coffee down on the stove and his bread on the table and took a newspaper from his pocket.

‘Is it still crawling with gendarmes out there?’

‘They’re patrolling right now. Every now and again you see one of them with a torch, searching some area of the harbour or other.’

Eva Mitchell was wasting no time, not letting Mrs Brown catch her breath.

‘It was all the money my father and I had left. If Brown gives it back, we’ll leave him part of it and we won’t press charges. If he refuses, he’ll be sentenced for murder and hanged.’

‘Murder?’

‘He killed his accomplice Teddy here in Dieppe three days ago. You knew Teddy, didn’t you?’

‘He travelled for the same company as my husband.’

‘In other words, they planned their jobs together. Brown burgled my father’s office and came over to Dieppe to join Teddy. They must have quarrelled over their shares of the spoils, and your husband killed Teddy. If you don’t believe me, call the inspector over. Now Brown is hiding somewhere in the town, and it’s up to you to find him and tell him what we decided. Do you have any money?’

‘I left Newhaven with two pounds.’

‘Here’s two more. All you need to do is have your meals and sleep here. It doesn’t cost much.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

She hadn't yet cried, but it was obvious she was going to as she gradually realized what was happening to her.

'That's up to you. Look for him! Put an ad in the paper. The inspector may be able to advise you.'

When Eva Mitchell came back into the dining room, sat down and helped herself to dessert, Mollison looked at her in amazement.

'What did you say to her?'

'I told her the truth. She's more likely to find her husband than we are, or else he'll find out she's here and come of his own free will.'

'But what if she does find him?' he asked, impressed.

'Meaning what?'

'He's committed a murder.'

'In France! It's nothing to do with you. That's the business of the French police.'

Her father was looking at her, just as astonished, his admiration for her mixed with a degree of embarrassment.

'Why didn't you tell us anything?'

'Because you might have stopped me from sending for her.'

She had her back to the glass partition of the lounge, and only the inspector could still see Mrs Brown slumped in an armchair, her face in her hands. Mollison finally put his napkin down on the table. When he entered the lounge, the young woman sighed, without uncovering her face:

'Is it true?'

'Yes, it is,' he said, sitting down beside her. 'Brown is in a sticky situation. So far, he's only risked prison, but now ...'

'Is it also true, that if he gives back the money ...'

'Mitchell won't press charges, that's right. Scotland Yard won't bother him any more. It'll then be up to him to deal with the French police. What have you done with the boys?'

'We have one boy and one girl,' she corrected him mechanically. 'A neighbour's looking after them. But tell me what I should do.'

Mollison looked over at the Mitchells, who were still eating, then down at the faded carpet. He lit his pipe.

'The most sensible thing may be to walk about the town, especially the areas that are deserted. Dieppe isn't a large town. There's a good chance Brown will spot you.'

She was afraid, you could see it in her eyes, afraid of the deserted streets and even of meeting her husband. Mollison didn't know what to say to her.

'Before you do anything else, I'd advise you to have dinner and then get some sleep. You'll have time to make your mind up tomorrow.'

And she was again left to her own devices in the little lounge, where Madame Dupré came and asked her in French if she wanted dinner. She didn't understand. Madame Dupré mimed eating, and Mrs Brown shook her head.

'She'll find him, you'll see!' Eva Mitchell asserted. 'I know how difficult it is for her, but it's hard for my father, too, being without money at his age, after having made so many artistes rich.'

The young couple stood up and went into the lounge, which they left discreetly on seeing a woman sitting there with reddened eyes. The husband asked Madame Dupré:

'Is there a cinema around here?'

They left. Camélia was at her post at the bar of the Moulin Rouge, her eyes bleary, a bitter twist to her mouth. The owner had just read the papers.

'Did you know him?'

'The little one, yes. Teddy, his name was. He came to France almost every month. He almost always thought of me. I knew he was in a dangerous profession, something a bit shady. There are times when anyone else would have let the cat out of the bag, but not him. He was a real gentleman, as they say. Polite, well brought up! He always let me into the bedroom before him and he'd never have left before me.'

Camélia broke off.

'Not that waltz!' she cried to the band.

She explained to the owner:

'That's the tune they were playing the last time he came, with the other fellow, the tall, thin one. I asked him to dance with me, and he told me he was busy with business, but that he'd be back soon. I didn't like the look of that friend of his. I whispered to Teddy, "Don't trust your pal!" I've always had premonitions. Like when my brother died ... Teddy just winked at me. They had three or four whiskies, the barman probably remembers. They left and I danced with Dédé ... I had a bad feeling about it. I'd have bet anything that Teddy wouldn't come back. The next day, I ran into the other fellow two or three times. I even talked to him. But I didn't know at that point, otherwise I think I'd have called the cops.'

The waiter was listening, too, and so was a taxi driver who came in for a drink every evening.

‘I wonder where he’s hiding out,’ the owner said, pouring her a drink.

Mrs Brown left the hotel without a word to anyone. Mollison followed her, for fear she might do something stupid. She didn’t know the town and headed off along the seafront in the dark. There was nobody about. She seemed lost in the humid vastness. She retraced her steps, turned into a lighted street, hesitated and found herself in the centre of town without realizing it.

She was walking unsteadily, as if very tired. At times she almost burst into a run, and at other times seemed on the verge of stopping for lack of energy. Passers-by turned to look at her. Mollison, who was watching her from the back, assumed she was crying as she walked, and he wondered whether Eva had acted as she had for her father or for herself.

He wasn’t pleased. He would have preferred to have a difficult role to play himself than to have that young blonde dream up a plan like this and see it through without a second thought.

What could Mrs Brown possibly do? Mustn’t she be thinking that her husband’s life depended on her, that she had to find him, come what may, and make him give back the five thousand pounds?

It had stopped raining. The cobbles were still wet, and the puddles glistened in the light of the street lamps. Mrs Brown found herself suddenly at the dock and stood motionless for quite a while before doing a U-turn. Her heels were worn down on one side, her red hair unruly on the back of her neck. She bumped into the inspector, recognized him immediately and exclaimed:

‘Tell me what you want me to do!’

She was crying without crying, in the sense that she was making a face as if crying even though her tears had dried up.

‘I’ll walk you back to the hotel, and you’ll go to bed. Miss Mitchell shouldn’t have sent you that telegram.’

‘But if it’s to save Brown ...’

She agreed only reluctantly to let herself be walked back, and from time to time she would stop at the entrance to a dark side street with a strong desire to call out her husband’s name.

‘Come on!’

‘What if he’s hiding in there?’

Then immediately, becoming talkative:

‘I know Teddy Baster. Brown told me he was his boss and asked me to be nice to him.’

‘Something like his boss,’ Mollison sighed, more exhausted by this futile walk through the town than by a whole day spent on a case. ‘Come on!’

‘Does he at least have a coat with him?’

‘No, he left his coat at the hotel.’

It was cold. If the winds turned eastward, there would be a frost towards morning.

‘How will he get anything to eat?’

‘I don’t know, Mrs Brown. Stop asking me questions. We’ll probably have news tomorrow.’

As they crossed the lobby of the hotel, they saw Eva Mitchell and her father in the lounge, playing draughts. Mollison thought for a moment that he would be obliged to put Mrs Brown to bed, so lacking in energy was she.

‘You promise nothing will happen before tomorrow?’

‘Yes, I promise!’

Ten minutes later, shut up in the phone box, he called the chief inspector from the railway police.

‘Hello, is that you? Have they found anything?’

‘Nothing. They’ll keep patrolling through the night. We’re pretty sure he hasn’t left town. By the way, I’m told an Englishwoman has arrived with a passport in the name of Mrs Brown. Is she ...?’

‘Yes. She’s his wife. I’m dealing with her.’

In his glass cabin, Maloin pushed away the newspaper he had just read. It was a local paper: the big Paris dailies weren’t covering the case. The whole story was there. The reporter had managed to get an interview with Mollison. The article revealed Brown’s past and gave details of the robbery at the Palladium, even showing a photograph of Mitchell and his daughter coming out of the Newhaven Hotel.

For two days now, without realizing it, Maloin hadn’t looked at the cupboard. For two days, too, he had had a headache from thinking too much. It was all the more annoying in that the same ideas kept coming back endlessly.

Hadn't he been reckless in making such big purchases that afternoon? He had seen his brother-in-law raise an eyebrow and he was sure he had something at the back of his mind when he had said:

'Anyone would think you'd won the jackpot!'

Nor did he want to cast any more glances at the cliff, which stood out more densely black against the blackness. It had never occurred to him that so many people would go to so much trouble over that suitcase. And perhaps what impressed him the most wasn't the man from the Yard, but old Mitchell, with his air of natural authority. He was the kind of man who, if he had asked Maloin for some information, like the address of a hotel or a shop, would have given him a tip. And Maloin would have accepted!

Was it possible that he hadn't any money left? This idea tickled Maloin and embarrassed him. In addition, there was a small phrase at the end of the article which he recited by heart.

Brown has a wife and two children who live in Newhaven and who apparently know nothing about any of this.

He had seen Brown, his raincoat, his threadbare suit, his resoled shoes. He could imagine the house, up on the cliff in Newhaven as his was on the cliff in Dieppe: a house of the same kind, just a tiny bit cosier. And even that wasn't certain!

He cleared track three when he was asked to, then drank a cup of burning-hot coffee. On the quayside, he spotted Inspector Mollison talking to the Englishwoman he had noticed in the street that afternoon.

Maloin was stifling. He felt he absolutely had to do something. For a moment, he was on the verge of opening the cupboard and throwing the suitcase in the dock.

What would be the point of that? It wouldn't change anything. If only he could be sure he would find it in the same place in a week or two, when all this was over! But the tide would carry it away, or it would sink into the silt, or else it would snag on the anchor of a boat.

He didn't seem to be thinking about Brown. He didn't want to think about him, deliberately gave himself other things to worry about, but in reality he was prowling around the hut in his mind. He had so often gone fishing at night! He knew the height of the tide, hour by hour. He could hear the noise of the backwash on the pebbles and smell the tar with which he had coated his boat. He was sure Brown already had tar stains on his clothes.

The gendarmes had been patrolling, visiting all the caves in the cliff. They would do so again. A gendarme might kick the wooden wall of the hut in passing and say:

‘He could always be in here!’

‘They have no right to force the door!’ Maloin said in a low voice.

But if the man was moving inside, would the gendarmes hesitate? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? Would Brown mention Maloin?

When the Newhaven ferry entered the harbour, Maloin didn’t think about the manoeuvres it was making. He saw nothing, just lights and moving shadows. Apart from the bell summoning him to work the signals, he heard only a vague noise.

And he didn’t dare look in the direction of his house, where the lights had been off for a long time. There were enough tools in the hut to force the lock. If Brown knew that Maloin had the suitcase, he must be thinking he had hidden it in the house.

The chief inspector was standing in the doorway of the ferry terminal, watching each traveller, and Maloin almost went to get him. Maybe he wouldn’t be sentenced too harshly. He didn’t have a criminal record. Everyone would put in a good word for him. But they would take the suitcase from him! He would lose his job!

So much so that he would have nothing left but to do odd jobs, like Baptiste, selling fish in the streets or something like that. Henriette would get a new job and she would resent him for it. And his wife would be sure to keep saying:

‘That’s what comes of trying to be smart!’

His brother-in-law would be cock-a-hoop! Even Ernest would no longer obey him!

If he had been able to go down and spend a few minutes at the Moulin Rouge, he would have got drunk. He would probably have gone off with Camélia, to prove to himself that he was still alive, still a strong man.

He spotted only two gendarmes, but once the Paris express had left he noticed the intermittent light of a torch and realized they were patrolling. The patrols passed below the signal box, and the beam of light played over the iron ladder.

It wasn’t until two hours later that the light appeared on the other side of the water, moving about on the top of the cliff, a hundred metres from his house, in an area of land of which he knew the smallest features.

‘A starving man!’ he grunted.

And immediately:

‘I must have done with it!’

It wasn’t possible to spend any more nights like the last three. He didn’t know what he was going to do, but he would do something. Without his stupid job, he would have gone straight to the hut, but it was impossible to leave the signal box unattended.

He was relieved to have made a decision, looked at his watch and spent the last three hours waiting, with a stubborn expression on his face. The fish market started in the dark. Day broke, clear and cold. His colleague arrived with his nostrils damp and his clothes chilled by the air.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Fine!’

Without having planned anything in advance, he turned into a shopping street where a pork butcher’s had just opened its doors and bought a sausage, two tins of sardines and a piece of pâté, looking at himself aggressively in the mirror that adorned the wall.

At the market, he made out a bistro, handed over his blue enamel can and had it filled with brandy.

He was sluggish. He was acting reluctantly, the way you perform a chore, like going to the funeral of a neighbour you didn’t even say hello to. He didn’t even believe in what he was doing. The world didn’t feel solid around him. If someone had suddenly shaken him and he’d woken in his bed, he wouldn’t have been any more surprised.

Instead of climbing the steep path, he continued along the base of the cliff, seeing no uniform at its top. His hut was a little further on, after the first rutted track. He had to walk over large pebbles and fallen rocks. As he had the provisions in his pockets, he assumed the pâté would end up mashed to pulp.

At the last moment, he sat down on a stone, suddenly feeling sorry for himself, his wife, his daughter and even Ernest. The house was behind him, very close, invisible, perched on the rock like a construction set, its chimney surely smoking. Ernest was having breakfast before going to school. They must have let Henriette sleep, since she so seldom had the opportunity to have a lie-in.

In the morning, the house had a smell of its own, made up of the smell of the rooms, the aroma of coffee and a little of the smell of the countryside.

When he got home, he always began by warming his hands at the fire, then he would take off his big shoes and put on his slippers, which would be warming up on the top of the oven.

The whole of the rest of the day was his, at first to sleep, with the kind of sleep where he was conscious of sleeping and could still hear the noises of the house and the street. After that, he could do whatever he liked, arrange his fishing lines, repaint his boat, fiddle with the wireless or dismantle an alarm clock.

He took the sausage from his pocket and looked at it curiously, as if he had forgotten that he was the one who had bought it. The sea was flat, barely fringed with white, but out at sea white caps jostled, pushed by winds coming from land. Maloin recognized the boats slowly trailing their scallop dredges.

‘We haven’t eaten scallops so far this winter,’ he thought.

He had granted himself enough of a respite. He couldn’t spend all day on his stone.

But he was acting with less and less conviction. He was no longer so sure of the importance or necessity of what he was about to do. It wouldn’t take much for him to go home, deciding that nothing had happened and that life could go on. Was that really not possible any more?

It was the memory of his brother-in-law, whom he had always hated, that made his mind up for him. He put the sausage back in his pocket and got heavily to his feet, as if he were aching all over.



Somebody might be watching him through binoculars. That often happened with fishermen dragging their trawling nets close to the coast. They would spot a small, dark dot on the cliff, or at the foot of the cliff, and say to themselves:

‘Look, Maloin’s going to fetch crabs.’

They would grab a pair of binoculars from the roof of the deckhouse and inspect the shore as they waited to pull in their nets.

There were three fishing boats in the pearly light of the morning: two with brown sails, one with blue.

Maloin was still walking in the direction of the hut with that outward calm that conceals inner nervousness. For it was nerves and nothing else, just as if he had to do something challenging, such as talk to the head of the railway network or speak up at a meeting.

At such moments, you’re lucid. You see everything, you hear everything, it’s as if you become two people. He somehow saw himself, as if in a mirror, moving the big key towards the lock.

He could open the door by just a few centimetres, fling the provisions into the hut, lock the door again and go. He could also leave the door open as he walked away. He had envisaged so many possible solutions, they had ceased to have any interest for him.

If he did one thing rather than another, it was simply because he had to do something. It was of no importance, and he knew perfectly well that it was too late to get out of it.

The key turned without difficulty: Maloin always took care of his things, and the lock was well oiled. He pushed the door open a crack and stared into the gloom, out of which the front of his boat loomed. It had once belonged to a cod fisherman.

Nothing moved. There was no noise, no creaking. Maloin didn't even hear a tiny quiver that might reveal the presence of a living being.

So he opened the door wider, and light entered the hut. At the same time, Maloin caught a strong smell, like the smell of a human stable. He frowned and peered into the area around the boat, which was on wooden rollers. To the right was a barrel of coal tar, to the left, heaps of baskets, and everywhere, in the smallest nooks and crannies, heaped willy-nilly, all kinds of things: planks, crates, an anchor, rope, old boxes.

'There hasn't been much air in here!' he thought.

He had never spent time in the hut with the door closed, and the acrid smell disturbed him. Again and again, his eyes searched the walls.

Without thinking about it – it was what he had come for – he took the sausage from his pocket and put it down on the boat, all the while trying to see if a foot or a hand was sticking out from somewhere.

'Monsieur Brown!' he said, in the same voice in which he would have spoken to anyone else.

The two cans of sardines now also took their place on the boat.

'Listen, Monsieur Brown. I know you're here. The hut is mine. If I'd wanted to report you, I'd have done it yesterday.'

He listened, bending forwards a little, the way you do after dropping a stone into a deep, dark well. The only vibration was the last echo of his voice.

'Well, it's up to you! As you can see, I've come to you in kindness. I couldn't have come yesterday because there was a gendarme just above you, on the cliff.'

He was holding the blue enamel can in his hand. For some reason, he didn't dare move. Even though he was improvising, he seemed to be reciting a speech he had learned.

'The most important thing is to eat. I've brought sausage, sardines and pâté. Do you hear me?'

His ears were as red as they'd been when, as a child, he had to compliment someone, and his voice was becoming sharper.

‘There’s no point playing smart. I know you’re listening. If you were gone, I’d have found the lock broken or the door ajar.’

Was he behind the barrel of coal tar? Was he behind the piles of baskets? Or below the boat? There was quite a lot of space under there.

‘I’ll leave you these provisions, plus a can of brandy. I think it’s best I close the door when I go. The gendarmes might patrol again, and if they found the door open they’d take a look inside.’

He had never before spoken into a void like this. It was so disconcerting that in the end he got angry.

‘Listen to me! We have no time to lose. I need to know if you’re there, alive, or if you’re dead.’

The thought of speaking to a dead man didn’t even make him smile.

‘You just have to say a word, or make a noise, any noise. I won’t try to see you. I’ll get out of here right away and bring you more to eat tomorrow.’

He waited, a hard look in his eyes. His mouth was starting to take on a threatening crease, and he lowered his head slightly in a gesture that was familiar when he was starting to lose his temper.

‘Don’t try and trick me into thinking you don’t understand French. I heard you talking to Camélia.’

He waited again, counting to ten to force himself to be patient.

‘I’ll count to three again,’ he said out loud. ‘One ... two ...’

It wasn’t just anger. It was fear. He didn’t dare move. He told himself that if he searched the hut, he might find a lifeless body, huddled in a corner like a rat that has eaten red wheat. For a moment, he thought that the smell ... No, after twenty-four hours a body doesn’t smell!

‘All right, then, I’m going!’

He did indeed take a step back, tempted to leave. Behind him, the door was open, looking out on the sun-drenched sea. It was so simple to just go, leaving the provisions on the boat.

‘I’m going,’ he said again.

But he didn’t go! He couldn’t leave! His feet were glued to the floor!

‘Come on, be nice! I came here to help you ...’

‘Just go, you idiot,’ an inner voice told him.

And inside him, he replied to the voice:

‘One more minute, just one! He’ll answer me, and then I’ll leave.’

‘It’ll be too late!’

‘Is that my fault?’

Yes, was it his fault if he was powerless to go out through that door, back into the world of coolness and daylight awaiting him? His eyes darted here and there. His voice was becoming less confident, with a hint of begging.

‘Monsieur Brown, I can feel myself getting angry.’

He was shaking with irritation, sensing that he was approaching the final minute.

‘One last time, I’ll count to three ... One ... two ...’

All this time, he had been looking straight in front of him, not even thinking that behind his back there was a corner darker than the others. It was from this corner that a creak came. Before Maloin could turn, he received a blow on his right shoulder, a blow struck with something heavy, like an iron bar or a hammer but sharper.

‘Bastard!’ he cried, doing a U-turn.

Brown was there. At least, there was someone who had been Brown and who, during the whole of Maloin’s soliloquy, would only have had to reach out his hand to touch him.

He had grown a reddish beard, his eyes glittered in the semi-darkness, and his Adam’s apple rose and fell to the rhythm of his hot panting.

His arm brandished the weapon again. It wasn’t a hammer, it was the hook used to unearth crabs from beneath stones and kelp.

Instinctively, Maloin seized the raised wrist, twisted it until the bones cracked and tore the hook from the fingers that still clung to it.

His nervousness vanished. He looked at the man, who was grimacing in pain and crouching, ready to leap. He no longer thought of him as Brown, or even as a man. All he knew was that this living thing was going to grab hold of him, that the two bodies would come together and roll on the floor, that fingers would try to seize a throat, dig into an eye, twist a limb.

And so, sharply, precisely, inhumanly, he struck. He didn’t take aim. The hook sank into something soft, giving rise to a wheezing gasp.

The thing was still alive. Its eyes were still shining. A hand reached out for Maloin.

‘Take that!’ he panted.

Another blow with the hook. Each blow had its echo in his flesh, like the day he had killed a rat with the heel of a shoe. It had taken ten blows! The rat had been determined to live!

Hot breath reached him in fits and starts, and a hand brushed his leg, trying to make him lose his balance.

‘Take that! And that!’

It wasn’t moving so much now. It was dragging on the ground. Fingers slowly separated. But then there was yet another twitch, and Maloin stood ready to strike.

The face was against the ground. The grey suit was dirty and torn. Blood stuck to the hair. The body was incredibly still now. Maloin, unable to bear it any longer, threw himself to his knees, sobbing, and cried out, wildly, trembling, shivering with cold:

‘I’m sorry! ... Say something! ... I’m sorry! ... I didn’t do it on purpose ... You know I didn’t mean to.’

He didn’t dare touch the dead man. He looked down at the nose crushed against the floor.

‘Monsieur Brown! ... Monsieur Brown! ... Say something ... I’m going to fetch a doctor ... You’ll be taken care of ... I’ll give you back your suitcase ... I’ll help you escape ...’

He turned to the open door and saw the blue boat and the brown one suspended in a patch of sea as featureless as the sky.

‘Monsieur Brown! ... For God’s sake ... At least admit it was you who started it ... I was only bringing you something to eat and drink ...’

He raised himself from his knees, took the can from the boat and, suddenly overcoming his terror, turned the body over onto its back.

The eyes were open. There was a wound on the temple, a hole rather, a real hole such as you would make in any material.

‘Monsieur Brown!’

He uncorked the can, pressed the mouth of it to the Englishman’s mouth and poured. The brandy gurgled out, sliding over the clenched teeth, over the chin, around the Adam’s apple.

‘You’re dead ...’ Maloin said, his voice that of a man waking up.

He got to his feet, brushed the dust from his knees and ran his hands through his hair, pushing it back. He needed time to catch his breath. His chest was rising and falling at a vigorous pace. His throat hurt a little, perhaps from having cried out.

He didn’t remember having wept and wondered why his eyelids were smarting.

He bent down to pick up the can and put it in his pocket, not even thinking of drinking what was left of the brandy.

His was a terrible calm, a calm such as he'd never known, a calm that was like emptiness. He was moving about like a man, but he could sense that he was no longer a man like any other. He had crossed an unknown border, without being able to say exactly when it had happened.

Gradually his face regained its serenity, and he was aware of it, felt his features lose their stiffness, his muscles relax, his skin become supple again.

He was tidying up! He couldn't have said that to anyone, they would have made fun of him. And yet that was how it was! He was tidying up, first his clothes, then everything around him. Various objects had been knocked over, including a pile of baskets, and in the midst of the fight he hadn't noticed.

There remained Brown's eyes, which he couldn't leave open. Maloin closed them, not even recoiling when he touched the eyelids. All he said was:

'There!'

He stuffed the sausage and the cans of sardines in his pocket and looked around one last time to make sure there was nothing more to be done. He was on his way out when a voice cried:

'Hello, Louis!'

He walked to the doorway and stood there.

'Hello, Mathilde!'

'Are you going out to sea?'

'Maybe yes, maybe no!'

It was his everyday voice. He half closed his eyes, because of the sun. Twenty metres from him was Mathilde, an old woman who fished for crabs and sold them in town. She had her hook in her hand, the same kind as the one in the hut, and she was stooping as she walked because of the basket she was carrying on her back.

'Is it going to be cold?'

'I think so!'

He stayed where he was after she had passed, with the dead man behind him and the sea in front. The air was so crisp that it gave the skin little needle pricks. There was an east wind, and the sea, the sky and the cliff were like the inside of a shell, so clear and iridescent were their colours. In

the distance, you could see the fishermen in the blue-sailed boat pulling in their dredge and throwing the scallops in a basket.

Maloin lit his pipe and for a moment watched the smoke rising vertically.

He had nothing more to do. From now on, and for ever, he had nothing more to do. Standing there with his pipe in his teeth, his shoulder hurting, he granted himself one more minute, two more minutes.

‘I’ll just finish my pipe,’ he promised.

There were lots of things that might happen, but he would have plenty of time to think it over. There was no rush. It was nobody’s business but his.

One night, up in his glass cage, when he was still a man like any other, heavy and slow, thinking his disjointed thoughts, he had pictured the hut, and even the act of killing Brown. But this time he finished the story in his mind, by imagining himself dragging the body to the sea, in the darkness.

That just made him shrug. Do the things we imagine like that have any relationship with reality, actual reality, the reality people don’t even suspect?

When he had considered the possibility of killing Brown, he hadn’t wanted to kill him and had been sure he wouldn’t do it, would never be capable of doing it.

And yet he had killed Brown!

Could he even have said why he hadn’t left after putting the provisions down on the boat? What demon had driven him to tell stories, to whine, to threaten, to make promises, to count to three like a little boy annoying his sister?

Nobody would answer that question. Nor would he. But he knew that was the mystery.

His pipe had gone out, and he stood there a while longer, the cool air bathing his skin. With his saliva, he wiped a very small bloodstain from his right forefinger.

‘Let’s go!’

Old Mathilde was crawling on all fours, like a spider, over the seaweed-covered rocks.

Maloin locked the door, walked across the pebbles and set off up the steep, rutted track. The three houses stood there, pink in the light, their chimneys smoking, a cut white stone under each window. A trawler was leaving the dock, without a tug, noiselessly, as if carried on the waves.

‘They always seem to be going faster in the harbour than out at sea,’ he thought.

He rubbed his shoes on the scraper, opened the door and came to a halt at the coat stand in the corridor.

‘Is that you?’ his wife called from upstairs.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re late. I almost sent Henriette to ...’

Henriette was in the kitchen, wearing an old dress and red slippers, from which her bare ankles emerged.

‘Give me some lunch.’

He didn’t often speak so softly. Putting the sausage and the sardines on the table, he realized that he had left the piece of pâté on the boat.

‘Why did you bring that?’

‘I felt like sausage. Is your mother doing the bedrooms?’

He ate seven slices of sausage with his coffee, then asked for wine and continued eating. He was hungry. It seemed to him with each mouthful that he was filling an emptiness in his chest.

‘What did your uncle Victor say yesterday when I left?’

‘He’s always the same.’

‘I bet he mentioned the fur.’

‘He says it’s not done in our situation to buy a fox for a young girl, that his wife waited until she was married before she got one.’

‘Loser,’ Maloin said.

It was best that his wife was busy upstairs, leaving him alone with his daughter.

‘Will you show me your fur? And everything I bought you yesterday ...’

Without stopping eating, he felt the fox. The fur struck him as less thick than it had the previous day, which cast a cloud over him for a moment.

‘How long does a fur like this last?’

‘Maybe three or four years, if you only wear it on Sundays. What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing.’

Nothing was the matter. It had been an involuntary grimace.

‘Don’t you want your slippers?’

‘No, I have to go out. Is Ernest at school?’

‘He left a long time ago. You forget it’s nine o’clock.’

He shook the blue can and poured what was left of the brandy into a glass.

‘There!’ he said, wiping his lips.

‘There what?’

‘There everything! There nothing! Just there! You wouldn’t understand.’

‘What’s the matter with you this morning?’

‘What do you think’s the matter with me?’

‘I don’t know. You’re funny. You scare me a bit.’

‘Why should you be scared?’

He was standing with his back to the fire and his hands behind his back, in his familiar pose. The fur lay on the table like a wild animal, next to the dirty dishes and the blue raincoat, which smelled of rubber.

‘Oh, yes! Uncle Victor also said these raincoats are unhealthy, because they stop you from sweating.’

The heat was making him numb. He felt a laziness creeping over him, and he shook himself before it was too late.

‘Give me my cap. No, not the new one. The old one’s still good.’

He stopped at the foot of the stairs and heard his wife sweeping. He touched the banister, then changed his mind.

‘Hello, Jeanne!’ he cried.

‘Aren’t you going to bed?’

‘Not now.’

‘If you see the pork butcher, tell him that—’

‘There’s no need. I brought sausage.’

He turned to his daughter and kissed her as furtively as he usually did, half on the cheek, half on the hair.

‘See you later,’ she said.

Without replying, he opened the door, closed it behind him and crossed the blue stone threshold.



It was nine forty. Germain had opened the trapdoor of the cellar to bring more bottles up to the bar. Madame Dupré was on the phone, placing orders.

‘Yes, seventeen escalopes ... Not too thick ...’

As she spoke she kept looking at the clock, because Inspector Mollison had asked to be woken at ten. They could hear old Mitchell doing his daily exercises in the bathroom.

Eva had already come down, wearing a dress with little red flowers and, as usual, had passed Madame Dupré without saying hello, her eyes fixed straight ahead. For several minutes she had stood in the doorway of the hotel, then, without a coat, her hair blowing in the wind, she had walked over to a figure leaning on the parapet of the sea wall.

It was bright and cool. The clear sky and the flowered dress were reminiscent of summer days. It was Mrs Brown who was leaning on the parapet, looking spellbound at the sea. She jumped when she heard a voice next to her.

‘Do you have any sole this morning?’ Madame Dupré asked on the telephone.

And her gaze went from the clock to the sea wall. Mrs Brown was a dark figure and Miss Mitchell a pale figure. Behind them brown sails passed, and Madame Dupré added:

‘Oh, and put in two dozen scallops for me. How much are they?’

Which didn’t stop her from thinking:

‘What’s she telling her this time?’

Because Eva was speaking vehemently to her companion and walking her back towards the hotel.

‘Hello? No, that’s too expensive! Just the sole!’

The two women moved from the gilded brightness of outside to the grey light of the lobby, then to the gloom of the lounge. Miss Mitchell kept talking. From time to time Mrs Brown would raise her fearful eyes and stammer a few words. Even if you didn’t understand English, you could guess what she was saying:

‘But what do you want me to do?’

Eva didn’t even break off, just came out with one sentence then another, avalanches of sentences that were so many orders and threats.

‘Excuse me. Is Inspector Mollison here?’

Madame Dupré hadn’t seen the stranger come in. He loomed up in front of her, a cheap suitcase in his hand.

‘I’m waking him in ten minutes,’ she replied after a glance at the clock. ‘Who shall I say wants him?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Maloin was in no hurry. There were two kinds of armchair in the lobby: some of rattan, the others of velvet. Accustomed to being humble, he chose a rattan one and put the suitcase down on the ground but didn’t dare cross his legs and kept his cap on his knees.

For a few moments, he didn’t notice what was happening in the lounge, the glass partition of which faced him. What attracted his attention was Eva moving about in search of a pen. Not finding one, she walked over to the desk, brushing against Maloin’s legs as she did so.

She was the same age as Henriette, but they had nothing in common, not their gestures, not their way of speaking and dressing. Maloin thought without any pleasure about the blue silk raincoat.

‘Give me a pen and ink.’

‘Of course, Mademoiselle Mitchell.’

He watched her as she went back into the lounge, and it was then that he noticed the distressed-looking young woman, who was wearing the kind of black tailored suit his daughter would have worn.

He didn’t understand English. Eva had sat her companion down at a pedestal table and was dictating to her:

‘Pitt Brown is requested to ...’

Maloin was surprised to hear her speak French, but already she was making a small gesture of irritation and speaking English in a tone of contained anger. Twice, she pointed to some words on the sheet of paper, while Mrs Brown kept her head bowed.

In the end, Eva pushed her away and took her place. Searching for her words, she composed a text which she read out loud as she went along:

‘Pitt Brown is requested to get into contact at all costs with his wife, Newhaven Hotel, Dieppe.’

For a long time, Maloin looked at them without understanding: his mind had grown lazy. When the truth struck him, he literally couldn’t take his eyes off the woman in the black tailored suit.

She must have spent the night crying: her nose was red, her eyelids swollen. Maloin continued making comparisons between her and his daughter, noticing for example the turned heels, the medallion hanging in the neckline of her blouse, the hair as unruly as Henriette’s.

He heard footsteps on the stairs, but they weren’t yet those of the inspector. Old Mitchell came down, greeted Madame Dupré as he was in the habit of greeting everyone and walked into the dining room. Germain came running.

It wasn’t until Mitchell was seated that he noticed Eva and Mrs Brown in the lounge, but he pretended not to be interested and ordered his breakfast.

Miss Mitchell once again brushed past Maloin, without apologizing, and handed her sheet of paper across the desk.

‘Please see that this ad gets into the Dieppe papers. I’ll pay for it.’

She joined her father, kissed him on the temple and stood there talking to him.

‘Germain! Go and wake Monsieur Mollison and tell him someone’s waiting for him.’

Maloin wasn’t impatient and didn’t react to anything. It was as if he’d been emptied of all the organs that make men agitated. He could have stayed there all day without moving, sitting on the edge of his rattan armchair, and nobody, looking at him, would have suspected that the suitcase everyone was looking for was there at his feet, nor that he had just killed the man the ads were addressed to.

A cleaning woman appeared with a bucket, a cloth and a brush to wash the lobby.

‘Sorry to bother you,’ she said. ‘Do you mind lifting your feet a second?’

Just like at home when the kitchen floor was being washed, and he kept his feet in the air while the cloth was passed underneath!

Germain entered the dining room with a tray containing bacon and eggs, pats of butter in a crystal dish and little pots of jam, all of which constituted old Mitchell's breakfast. As he went through the door he glanced absently at Maloin, without noticing anything but the railwayman's cap.

Mrs Brown was slumped in an armchair in the lounge. It was as if she were waiting for further orders from Eva before she could come back to life. Mitchell was eating. His daughter, standing in the sun that beat on the dirty window pane, was presumably talking about what she had done that morning, while in his room the inspector was shaving.

Maloin remained seated, as if he were in a railway waiting room. He could go, and nobody would stop him. He could take the suitcase, catch a train, then another, stop in any town, go into a bank and change the money.

All he had to do was reach out his arm, pick up the case and go back out into the sunlight.

He could also leave the case where it was, where it might stay for a day or two before a servant thought of looking to see what was inside. At the desk, Madame Dupré was on the phone:

'Hello? Yes! ... Brown ... *B* for Bernard, *R* for Robert ...'

She dictated the ad, word for word.

'Will it be in this evening's edition? Can you tell me how much I owe you? It's for a guest.'

And suddenly, in another tone of voice, when Maloin wasn't expecting it:

'Yes, inspector, it's the man sitting over there.'

Maloin stood up, a tightness in his throat, and once again looked over at Mrs Brown.

'Are you the man who wants to see me?'

Was he going to be incapable of speaking? He looked at Mollison, his lips trembling, unable to utter the words he had intended to say. This lasted for a few seconds and, to have done with it, he abruptly picked up the suitcase, handed it to the inspector and said:

'Here!'

Mollison frowned, half opened the case, then turned towards the dining room and said calmly:

'Mr Mitchell!'

Maloin noticed that there was no joy in the inspector's expression, that on the contrary a heaviness came over his eyes. Old Mitchell abandoned his breakfast and walked towards them, preceded by his daughter.

'Here's your money,' Mollison said, pointing to the suitcase.

Instead of looking at Mitchell, he was looking, through the windows of the lounge, at Mrs Brown. She was watching them, with no idea what was going on. To examine the contents of the suitcase, the old man laid it on a rattan table and calmly sorted the wads of banknotes, counting in a low voice. Eva whispered something in his ear. He looked up at Maloin, chose a note, changed his mind, took a second one and held them both out.

He was quite surprised to see Maloin shake his head. Thinking it wasn't enough, he added a third note.

'What about Brown?' Mollison asked in the meantime.

Drawn by the banknotes, Mrs Brown was standing by the door of the lounge, humbly searching for an explanation. Eva gave it to her from a distance, while helping her father to count.

There was still time. If Maloin wanted, he had only to say that he had found the suitcase somewhere and swear he didn't know anything. Mrs Brown's eyes were fixed on him, questioningly, already with a hint of despair in them.

Maloin took his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. It occurred to him that since she didn't understand French, he could speak, and he did so very fast, in a low voice.

'I've just killed Brown.'

It was over! He took a deep breath and looked elsewhere. Mollison, without wasting any time, was already taking his hat and coat from the coat stand.

'Come with me.'

But Mrs Brown followed them as if she had no intention of leaving them alone. Mollison didn't dare turn to her. Maloin was finding it hard to swallow and now, as they walked, the woman started speaking, in English, in a faltering voice.

'What did he say?'

They walked along the street, in the sun, Mollison in the middle. Nobody knew where they were going, but perhaps all three had an inkling.

'She's asking if her husband suffered.'

'Did she understand?'

He almost set off at a run, but it was only an intention, one that his body didn't obey, and he continued to walk at the same pace as the others.

'What should I tell her?' Mollison asked.

'I don't know! He's dead! Do you understand?'

He didn't know. He couldn't grasp the meaning of the question.

He kept trying to remember, but there was nothing in his memory that corresponded to the word 'suffer'.

'It's so different,' he murmured, feeling for the first time how powerless he was to explain himself.

He looked at the sea so as not to see Mrs Brown's face tilted towards him.

'I'll tell her he didn't!'

Mollison spoke to her in English. Mrs Brown dabbed her eyes. Maloin, of his own accord, headed in the direction of the cliff.

'Is it very far?' Mollison asked.

'On the other side of the dock, not far from my house. You'll see!'

In winter, there are only ever two or three mornings so calm and clear that you would like to hear them alive with Sunday church bells.

'Hello, Louis!' someone cried as they walked through the fish market.

Maloin recognized Baptiste, who had pulled his boat from the water and was taking advantage of the fine weather to repaint it a soft green.

'Hello!' he echoed.

He saw, with indifference, the signal box on the other side of the water. They walked in step, all three of them, as if they had agreed, and Maloin didn't have the feeling he was in the company of foreigners.

They had barely spoken, and yet Mrs Brown already knew everything. There hadn't even been any screams, or threats, or painful gestures. She had understood the French without knowing the language. She had guessed where they were going and she was walking as fast as they were, her features drawn like theirs, her eyes a little more fixed than usual, her lips drier.

When Maloin saw his house, perched up on the cliff, a whole section of wall streaming with sun, he pointed it out to Mollison.

'That's where I live!'

And Mrs Brown also looked up at the house.

They were walking faster and faster. In the hollow of her hand she was holding a handkerchief rolled into a ball and occasionally she would dab at

her eyes or nostrils with it.

A window was open on the first floor. Someone was moving in the shadows of the bedroom, but it was impossible to tell if it was Henriette or her mother.

‘This way. Careful, it’s hard to walk.’

They skirted the cliff. The boat with the blue sail was coming back to harbour, and the owner called out:

‘Hello, Louis!’

‘They’ve been dredging scallops,’ Maloin explained.

He said this shyly, as if, by being pleasant, he would make them forget his crime. Not that this was his intention. It was instinctive, and he would have liked to be even more considerate to young Mrs Brown, who wasn’t used to walking on pebbles and kept hurting her ankles.

The other two boats were still fishing. The tide had carried them so close to shore that you could see the smoke from a pipe, and one of the fishermen drinking wine straight from the bottle.

‘From here, you can see the hut.’

Unable to stop talking, he went on:

‘I always work at night. So I have my days free and I do odd jobs, I fish, I do a bit of everything. I built that hut myself for my boat and my tackle.’

In speaking like this he seemed to be saying:

‘You see how I am. I don’t have a bad bone in my body. I’m a good man. You mustn’t be angry with me. Deep down, I’m as unhappy as Madame Brown. We’re both unhappy. You’ll see!’

He brandished the key. Mrs Brown looked at it with her shrunken pupils, the rings under her eyes growing deeper, and seized hold of the inspector’s arm.

‘It was so stupid how it happened ...’ Maloin said.

He stood aside to let them see, his back stooped as if expecting blows.

Mrs Brown didn’t move. Clinging to Mollison, she stared at the body lying there, then at Maloin, then again at the body. She couldn’t speak, didn’t make a movement and seemed unable to breathe.

‘There!’ Maloin said, his knees trembling, the palms of his hands moist.

The inspector coughed. ‘Was he hiding in the hut?’ he asked.

‘Yes. When I found out, I brought sausage and sardines. Look! The white paper on the boat, that’s a slice of pâté.’

He fell silent. Mrs Brown had thrown herself on the ground, in the pebbles, where she writhed and screamed, her arms and legs moving convulsively. Mollison knelt by her and said something in English. Maloin didn't know what to do, or where to put himself. As he had a clean handkerchief, he unfolded it and spread it over Brown's face.

'Close the hut,' Mollison ordered as he tended to the woman.

Maloin obeyed, turning the key and putting it in his pocket. Then he waited discreetly, looking out to sea.

Minutes went by. When he turned, the inspector was helping Mrs Brown to her feet, patting the hem of her dress to get the dust off. Without looking at Maloin, she uttered a few words.

'She's asking if he said anything for her,' Mollison translated.

What could he reply? She hadn't understood a thing. That wasn't how it had happened. They had fought, with a hook, until one of them couldn't speak any more. He was thinking, but although he really would have liked to please her, he couldn't find an acceptable lie and he shook his head.

It was dreadful not to be able to say anything, and above all to think that the only man who could have understood was the dead man.

'Come on!' he sighed.

He almost lost his temper when Mollison expressed surprise.

'Where do you want to go?'

'To the police!'

Was he going to run up against walls everywhere? What was so extraordinary about his behaviour? A disaster had occurred, just as they occur every day: sometimes it's an accident, at other times a shipwreck, at others still a crime. Doesn't it all come to the same thing?

There were two victims, three victims, six victims. Brown was dead. But Maloin could have died instead of him, and it would be Brown who would now be explaining the matter to Madame Maloin!

As for being unhappy, they were all as unhappy as each other, even Henriette and Ernest, who suspected nothing as yet.

'Let's all go back to town,' Mollison said. 'We'll see later.'

'If you want. But there's nothing to see.'

He would have given a lot to help Mrs Brown walk on the pebbles, and occasionally he threw her a brief glance, as if it were possible that she could accept his arm. And yet, of this he was sure, she would later allow Eva Mitchell to console her.

‘It’s pathetic and stupid!’ he confided, despite himself, to the inspector.

‘What’s he saying?’ Mrs Brown asked in English.

‘Nothing!’ Mollison replied after a short hesitation.

At the doorway of the hotel, Maloin stopped and declared:

‘I’ll wait for you here.’

He was sickened to see that the inspector was afraid he would run away. Heavy leather suitcases were being carried out, bearing the labels of luxury hotels. They were Mitchell’s luggage. The old man himself was busy settling his bill, buried in his fur-lined coat.

Maloin saw him enter the lounge in the company of the inspector and Mrs Brown. Soon afterwards, Eva joined them, dressed for the journey. At last, after a few minutes, Mollison came out and approached Maloin, who asked:

‘Did they give her something, at least?’

‘Yes.’

‘A lot?’

‘A hundred pounds.’

As they walked side by side through the sunny town, the inspector suddenly admitted what was preoccupying him.

‘Why are you going to the police?’ he said, looking elsewhere.

‘Where do you think I should go?’

‘I don’t know! If you’d wanted ... I assume you’re going to plead self-defence?’

To which Maloin retorted:

‘Do you suppose I’m thinking about that?’

He was the first to enter the chief inspector’s office. As the office was at the station and Maloin was wearing his railwayman’s uniform, the chief inspector assumed it was about a railway matter.

‘What do you want, old friend?’

He gave a start, incredulous, when the ‘old friend’ said:

‘I killed Brown this morning, and I’ve come to—’

‘Hold on a minute!’

He turned to Mollison.

‘What’s this man talking about? Do you know him?’

Maloin looked at the chief inspector’s polished shoes, his blue suit with its two rows of buttons, his parted hair and finally his thin Legion of Honour ribbon, and thought:

‘He won’t understand!’

‘Let’s begin at the beginning,’ the man said, sitting down at his desk and unscrewing the cap from his pen. ‘Who are you?’

‘Louis Maloin, signalman at the ferry terminal.’

‘How do you know the Englishman named Brown?’

Maloin was sorry he had come. He hadn’t foreseen this. He had wanted to follow his destiny, to go to prison, which was unavoidable given that he had killed Brown, but to go there simply, with dignity.

‘I saw him push his companion in the water and I fished out the suitcase.’

He had that aggressive look on his face again, the one he had whenever his brother-in-law paid a visit.

‘What did you do with this suitcase?’

‘He’s just given it back to Mitchell,’ Mollison cut in, sensing Maloin’s impatience.

‘Why?’

‘Because I killed Brown, damn it!’ he screamed.

‘Hold on a minute. It strikes me these are two different cases. Why did you kill Brown?’

‘I didn’t want to kill him. I took him sausage and sardines, and talked to him for a quarter of an hour. He was pretending he wasn’t there, or that he was dead. When I heard him move ...’

‘How many blows did you strike?’

‘I didn’t count.’

‘The autopsy will show us. Once Brown was dead, what did you do with the suitcase?’

‘First I went home.’

‘To wipe off the bloodstains?’

‘No! I went home to go home. I had something to eat. Then I left.’

‘You admit you had something to eat?’

‘I actually ate Brown’s sausage,’ Maloin said defiantly. ‘Are you happy now?’

‘So you killed him to keep the money?’

Maloin preferred to look down at the floor without saying anything, his eyes forbidding, his jaws clenched. The chief inspector looked at him for a moment through half-closed eyes, then picked up the receiver.

‘Give me the Palais de Justice, mademoiselle. Hello! I’d like to speak to the public prosecutor ... Hello? Is that you, sir? Janet speaking! I have here

in my office the individual who was in possession of the banknotes stolen from Mitchell ... Yes, I spoke to you about the case the day before yesterday ... No, he's a Frenchman, a railway employee. This morning, he killed Brown.'

Why did he feel the need to wink as he spoke?

'Understood! I'll be there. We'll be able to proceed with the reconstruction immediately after lunch.'

It was already eleven thirty by the marble clock on the mantelpiece. Ernest had left school and was walking towards the steep path with little Bernard, who lived in the next house.

'Hello? Give me the police station ... The station? Janet speaking. Can you send me two men to guard a fellow who's just been brought in?'

Maloin hadn't been brought in. Why the lie? And why was he a 'fellow'?

'As for you, my friend ...' the chief inspector said, getting to his feet.

He was quite surprised by the look Maloin gave him, a look he hadn't expected, a grave, profound look that seemed to come from a great height and pass judgement on the little man with the polished shoes.

'... the law,' he went on more quickly, 'demands that you be accompanied by a lawyer for when the prosecutor's department comes. That will happen this afternoon. Do you have a preference?'

What now? Maloin shrugged, thinking with nostalgia of the visit the three of them had made earlier to the hut. How much simpler and more dignified that had been!

'Have you told your family?'

'I may have invited them to witness the thing you just mentioned!' he retorted, surprised at his own boldness.

Because he didn't feel like joking. On the contrary, he yearned for peace and contemplation. What they should have done was take him to a cell and leave him there, quietly waiting, while they decided his fate.

'You won't keep up this attitude much longer!'

Maloin smiled, with a smile that was like a padlock placed on his inner life.

He had understood. He wouldn't try to explain any more. He would meekly give them the information they asked of him, but not a word more.

That very afternoon, he passed between the rows of onlookers gathered around his hut, without bowing his head. Why lower his eyes in front of

Baptiste? Or in front of these well-dressed gentlemen carrying briefcases and bustling about on every side?

‘You admit that ...’

They were trying to be clever, seeing who could best catch him out, even though he had explained everything of his own free will, without waiting for them to come looking for him.

He heard sobbing from the top of the cliff and, looking up, saw his wife crying into her apron, a few steps from the Bernards. She’d had to entrust Ernest to other neighbours. For a long time, he looked for Henriette and finally spotted her hiding behind the crowd.

‘Will you do exactly what you did this morning?’

He looked at them with contempt, all of them, the way they were, the prosecutor, the examining magistrate, who had a goatee, and others whose rank he didn’t know. He had been given a lawyer who kept making him signs that meant:

‘Careful!’

Careful about what? Since they insisted, what did it matter to him to play the scene again? Except that he was incapable of finding again the words he had spoken before, and without the words his gestures were meaningless.

‘I apologize, my poor Brown,’ he said to himself. ‘They absolutely want to see me handle the hook.’

When he picked it up, calmly, the way you pick up a crab hook, there was a murmur, and people recoiled in fright.

‘Where was this object?’

‘Nowhere. Brown was holding it.’

‘How did you hit him?’

‘I hit out.’

At which the crowd murmured again! He didn’t care. It almost gave him pleasure to find they were so stupid.

‘Look, there’s the piece of pâté.’

‘Don’t touch it!’ the examining magistrate cried.

It all lasted two hours, with clerks of the court taking notes, and sharp words between the magistrate and the lawyer. They had removed the handcuffs from Maloin to allow him to take the hook. When it was over, they put them back on.

‘Do you have any other experiments to suggest?’ the prosecutor asked the lawyer.

‘None. Obviously, I’m requesting a psychological report on my client.’
The previous day, when they had passed Maloin, all the spectators had said:

‘Hello, Louis!’

Now they were looking at him in terror, as if he were no longer Maloin, or even a man. Even his daughter stayed in the back row!

They hadn’t been able to get to the hut by car, and the cortège crossed part of the town on foot. Little boys ran so as not to lose sight of the prisoner. Photographers put themselves in his path.

At last, he was locked in a cell, and he looked with satisfaction at the white walls, the narrow fold-up bed, the pull-down shelf. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so tired in his life and he was about to go to sleep, fully clothed, when his lawyer was admitted.

‘You made every possible blunder, if you don’t mind my saying so.’

At home, they were probably sitting weeping in the kitchen. The light had been switched on, and the blue can, which he had bought one Saturday afternoon before Henriette was born, was on the table, smelling of strong brandy.

‘I’ve come to give you some advice.’

Maloin looked at the lawyer as he would have looked at a curious but useless object.

‘Everyone feels the same, that your cynicism is revolting, which makes my task a difficult one. You have to—’

Maloin interrupted him.

‘By the way, when’s the funeral?’

‘Whose funeral?’

‘Brown’s.’

‘We don’t know yet. There has to be a post-mortem first.’

‘But why, since I explained everything?’

‘It’s necessary to know which blow caused the death, and how.’

‘Has his wife left?’

‘She’s still at the hotel.’

‘Do you think Brown will be buried in Dieppe?’

‘Unless she pays for him to be transported to England.’

‘Let the Mitchells pay!’

He looked at his lawyer, frowned and sighed:

‘Leave me alone.’

‘We absolutely have to agree—’

‘Yes, tomorrow! Another day!’

Too bad! He wouldn’t go to the funeral. Mrs Brown would spend the hundred pounds she had been given on taking her husband’s body home. And he wouldn’t see either of them again.

It was stupid, but that’s the way it was! The most revolting thing was that it could have been different. It had all been down to chance.

For example, when Brown had almost climbed into the signal box that night but had stopped on the second rung! What would they have said to each other up there, the two of them?

And when he had followed Maloin home without making up his mind to talk to him, when Maloin was ready to give him back the suitcase!

And what about the morning when he’d gone to the hut with the sausage, the sardines, the pâté?

What would they have said to each other, the two of them? What would they have decided? What would have become of them after that, what would have become of the two households, the one in Newhaven and the one in Dieppe, with the two wives and the children?

‘It wasn’t possible!’ he concluded in a low voice.

‘What wasn’t possible?’

Maloin saw his lawyer and sighed:

‘Nothing! I’m thinking.’

‘That’s just it. I think you think too much.’

It was better to let that one pass.

‘Now I’d like to sleep.’

It wasn’t true. As soon as the lawyer was outside, whispering in the corridor with the guard, Maloin huddled on his bed and thought some more about Brown and his wife and their house on the other side of the water, with windows that lit up in the evening.

When he was sentenced to five years, his wife and daughter threw themselves into his arms, sobbing. He kissed them and looked around him as if searching for someone.

Then he meekly followed the gendarmes.



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